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# STARBURST

ISSUE  
398





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YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR!"

BLOODY DISGUSTING

# SKINWALKERS

OUT FEBRUARY 24<sup>TH</sup>



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# EDITORIAL

Welcome to **Starburst** Issue 398.

Starburst was long overdue a Muppets cover, and here it is. This issue we give these iconic characters the full treatment, and journey through the years since **The Muppet Show** pretty much caused us to acknowledge that we aren't ever really *that* grown-up. Obviously it's not just a focus on the past, **Muppets Most Wanted** is soon to hit your local multiplex, and we took time to chat with director James Bobin, and producer Todd Lieberman. Captain America is also about to hit us hard and fast with the saga of **The Winter Soldier**. We take you through his comic book beginnings in the first part of our Cap comic retrospective, before giving you the lowdown on what to expect in the new movie. All this and the usual goodies. You guys are just spoil!

We are also heading rapidly towards our mighty Issue 400, and our fearless creator Dez Skinn is working with us to bring you something REALLY special. This does indeed mean that your favourite genre mag is about to change yet again, readying itself for the next 400 issues. This is your last chance to get involved. If there is anything you think we should include in this landmark celebration issue just email me at [jordan.royce@starburstmagazine.com](mailto:jordan.royce@starburstmagazine.com)

In the meantime, you know the drill. Keep watching the weird and wonderful...

  
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# THINGS TO COME

For all the latest news updates go to [www.starburstmagazine.com](http://www.starburstmagazine.com)

a round-up of the best (and worst) of this month's genre news



## PREACHER

It's been a long journey (16 years off-and-on), but now it's finally official: the live-action **Preacher** adaptation is happening, and just as every sane fan had hoped, it won't be bastardised for the big-screen (where it would have no doubt been met with ambivalence anyway). Instead, the epic story of a pissed-off Texas preacher, his boozy vampire buddy and hit-woman ex-partner on a mission to find (and kill) God will get to be told on TV. Even better, the channel ponying up the cash are AMC, producers of another acclaimed comic book adaptation, **The Walking Dead**. As we gave you the heads-up in TTC 396, actor Seth Rogen (**This is the End**) and screenwriting partner Evan Goldberg (ditto) are behind the project as producers, and as left-field a choice those guys are, they've been pursuing this gig with the same drive Custer himself displayed hunting Big Beady, so rest assured the property looks to finally be in safe hands. Providing further comfort still, the showrunner is Sam Catlin, fresh from his stint on the last four seasons of a little show called **Breaking Bad** as one of its core writers/producers. And to think we came this close to a heavily neutered movie version from the director of **I Am Number Four**. Phew.

Also on the former Green Hornet's slate is **Sausage Party**, an animated tale chronicling the tragic events that befall an apparently sentient pork byproduct when he topples out of a shopping basket and gets lost in a supermarket. Rogen & Goldberg provide the screenplay here also, with the former lending his distinctive vocals to the missing meat treat. Let's hope for the sake of the sausage that Rogen & Goldberg don't have a **Preacher** crossover in mind - poor little fella wouldn't stand a chance against Odin Quinncannon. (If you're unfamiliar, don't Google him. You'll regret it.)

## BARBARELLA

The small screen **Barbarella** reimagining, which has been out of the news for a full year, might finally be moving forward after makers Gaumont International Television inked a deal with Amazon Studios, who will broadcast the potential series through their streaming services. Behind the scenes little has changed since we last updated on the project, with **Skyfall** writers Neal Purvis and Robert Wade still on scripting duties and **Drive**'s Nicolas Winding Refn as series producer and pilot director. No further details have been released, but with Gaumont International Television enjoying recent success with the likes of **Hannibal** and **Hemlock Grove**, we expect they'll be even more momentum with this project soon.

## POSTER MORTEM



We're in two minds whether we want this thing to do well. If it proves a success, Robert Rodriguez has already threatened he'd love to give **The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl** the serialised treatment too. And we can't ever let that happen.

## SUPERMAN/BATMAN

After months of speculation, producers revealed who they'd chosen to portray the new Lex Luthor in the *Man of Steel* sequel, and in doing so managed to elicit an even more seismic WTF than the one which greeted Ben Affleck's casting as The Bat last year. Forget those Joaquin Phoenix rumours, strike Mark Strong off the list and put aside your hopes that Bryan Cranston will 'break bad' on an even grander scale; nope, Supe's greatest nemesis will now be played by Jesse Eisenberg. Yep, the kid from *Zombieland*. Considering there's only one year's age difference between Eisenberg's Lex and Michael Rosenbaum's *Smallville* incarnation, fans were understandably confused. And will probably remain that way until the Superman/Batman project opens and we get to see exactly what Zack Snyder's thinking. Alas though, we're now in for an even longer wait, with Warner Bros recently deciding a May 2016 release would benefit the movie, allowing as it does a full extra year of production. Causing less of an outcry was the announcement of Jeremy Irons, who'll play butler to Ben Affleck as a younger incarnation of Alfred Pennyworth. (Basically everybody was too bamboozled from the Eisenberg thing to really question it.)

Meanwhile, in other DC-related news... Production on the unnecessary sounding Batman spin-off *Gotham* continues to gather pace, with the casting of 35-year old Ben McKenzie as Jim Gordon (he was in *The OC* apparently); Adam West-era *Batman* is finally getting a full DVD release (better late than never); The CW scrapped plans for Wonder Woman origin show *Amazon* to the surprise of no one; and *Constantine* (as in the British occultist John, not our cover star) has landed itself a director, with Neil Marshall (*The Descent*; *Game of Thrones*) signing on to helm the pilot episode for NBC.

## ROSEMARY'S BABY

NBC's risky re-adaptation of Ira Levin's 1967 novel has begun to gather its cast, with Zoe Saldana, Jason Isaacs (hell!) and Patrick J. Adams signing on in key roles. *Avatar* star and soon-to-be Guardian of the Galaxy Zoe Saldana inherits the role first made famous by Mia Farrow in the 1968 classic, while Isaacs, well known in genre circles himself for his work in the *Harry Potter* franchise as Lucius Malfoy, will continue to dabble in the dark arts as sinister Satanist *Is there any other kind?*

— Ed Roman Castevet, who wheedles his way into Rosemary and her hubby's life when they become neighbours. Adams, who will be familiar to anybody who watches *Suits* (whatever *Suits* is), will portray Rosemary's easily manipulated partner, Guy Woodhouse. Look out for the 4-part mini-series to hit TV screens later this year.

## MARVEL STUDIOS

Though we've reported it in these very pages in the past, we never quite allowed ourselves to get excited at the prospect of the oft-rumoured *Agent Carter* TV series. Given Marvel Studios' track record for shying away from granting heroines their own vehicles, coupled with the costly period setting, it all just seemed very unlikely. Sure, Peggy Carter's 15-minute One-Shot was superb, but there's not much of a gamble on Marvel Studios' part when the project is just a Blu-ray extra on a movie everybody is going to buy anyway (ie: *Iron Man 3*). Well, it seems we were wrong to ever doubt the studio, because it appears they're very serious about giving Hayley Atwell her own permanent vehicle, with writer/producers Tara Butters & Michele Fazekas (primarily known for The CW's *Reaper*) being brought in to the fold to develop the *Agent Carter* TV show for ABC. The question is, will the series replace the ailing *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* or act as a natural companion piece? We hope it's the latter, as *AoS* continues to really find its stride.

One of the biggest pieces of news to come from Earth-19999 this month is attributed to its smallest hero, with the announcement that Michael Douglas is joining the cast of *Ant-Man* as Hank Pym. Did you think Paul Rudd was Pym? So did we. Turns out he's more likely Scott Lang, eventual successor to the identity, but since that's yet-to-be-confirmed by Marvel Studios we'll resist jumping the gun a second time. Joining Rashida Jones on the shortlist for another lead role is *The Desolation of Smaug*'s Evangeline Lilly, who's come out of her self-imposed post-*LOST* hiatus swinging! Talk of the role being that of The Wasp has naturally resurfaced and considering how much of a fan MCU consultant Joss Whedon is of that particular character, her introduction in an upcoming movie looks increasingly likely.

Over at Whedon's own *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, we got confirmation that Thomas Kretschmann (*Dracula*) has signed a multi-movie contract as HYDRA operative Baron Wolfgang von Strucker, and Paul Bettany was rumoured to be making his first real appearance in a Marvel movie (he's voiced J.A.R.V.I.S. since 2008's *Iron Man*) as Ultron's creation, The Vision. In more unsubstantiated scuttlebutt (at the time of going to print, natch), Johnny Depp's name continues to be mentioned in connection to *Dr. Strange*, a character fully expected to be getting his own movie in 2016. Other movies from the Marvel Studios stable that have yet to be officially announced but are already being worked on are *Thor 3* and *Captain America 3*. In the case of the God of Thunder's third outing, *The Dark World* writers Christopher Yost & Craig Kyle were re-hired this month, as were the Russo Brothers, who will return to helm Steve Rogers' next adventure also.

## POSTER MORTEM



These superb propaganda-style posters herald the upcoming animated series *Star Wars Rebels*, which, in a vote of confidence from Disney, will now debut with a TV movie this Summer rather than its previously planned September premiere. In other news from the Galaxy far, far away this month, new Lucasfilm head Kathleen Kennedy revealed that the company plans to tighten the universe's canon, meaning that for the first time since 1977, everything being released under the *Star Wars* banner, be it a comic book, novel, videogame, or T-Shirt will be canonical to the movies and TV projects. (Ok, so clothing is probably exempt from the ruling, but you get the idea.)



## FEAR PARIS

"Darkness has descended on the city of romance, and Death is coming for you in the most glorious way imaginable." So goes the logline of the long gestating, genre-bending sci-fi/fantasy/horror anthology **Fear Paris**, now finally scheduled to begin filming later this year. Originally titled **Paris, I'll Kill You**, the initial plan was to deliver a collection of ten vignettes leaving a trail of bodies across the City of Light, each to be made by a different director. However, scheduling issues with some of the directors and the untimely death of David R. Ellis (**Snakes on a Plane**), who was also to take on a segment, meant that filming was forever delayed. Now that production is finally moving forwards, Xavier Gens (**The Divide**), Timo Vuorensola (**Iron Sky**) and genre legend Joe Dante have each been confirmed to be helming a segment, with another two directors to come on board soon. The conceptual designer is Dutch director Richard Raaphorst (**Frankenstein's Army**), and if you're familiar with the legion of undead Nazi biomechanical chimera from that film, you'll know what great things to expect. | AM

## STUDIO GHIBLI

Anime movie giants Studio Ghibli have announced their first ever TV series, a coming of age fantasy titled **Ronia the Robber's Daughter**.

The series is based on a children's book by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren (creator of Pippi Longstocking), and the story, as you probably gathered, revolves around a little girl named Ronia (or Ronja, depending on which transliteration you subscribe to), who is the only child of the chief of a clan of bandits.

Living in a castle on a tall rock in the middle of a pine forest, the series will follow Ronia's adventures exploring the woodland surrounding her home, her growing friendship with the son of a rival bandit clan's chief, and her changing attitudes as she begins to question her father's life of thievery. As well as lessons of maturing childhood, the story will also feature the kind of magical creatures for which Ghibli are renowned, the inhabitants of the forest likely being reminiscent of those seen in **My Neighbour Totoro**, **Princess Mononoke** or **Pom Poko**.

The series will be directed by Gorô Miyazaki, son of studio co-founder Hayao and the director of Ghibli films **Tales From Earthsea** and **From Up on Poppy Hill**, and will debut on Japanese TV in August. | AM

## MAGIC: THE GATHERING

As the potential stock of high fantasy continues to rise, studios are looking in increasingly esoteric places for the next big thing, with news that 20th Century Fox have bought the rights to produce films based on popular card game **Magic: The Gathering**. Three years ago, basing a film on a CCG might have seemed a ridiculous idea, but then **Battleship** was inflicted upon the world and all bets were off!

Exactly how the game's universe will be adapted to the big screen is unclear at this point, but two possibilities immediately present themselves. The first is the story of the Brothers' War, one of the oldest and most well-known backstories hinted at in the game, which details a global conflict between two master artificers that eventually led to a dark age, the fall of the planet's peaceful nations and an ice age that devastated what remained of civilisation.

The second possibility is the Weatherlight Saga, a classically archetypal fantasy cycle of a diverse group of characters travelling to save the kidnapped captain of the titular skyship. This expansion marked the first time in the game's development where a set was directly tied to a specific narrative rather than disjointed allusions to a vague mythos.

If we all play our cards right we'll have more information on this project very soon! | AM

## THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Tim Burton's 2010 reimagining of **Alice in Wonderland** did a lot of things. It managed to universally discredit 3D as a cinematic form, used as it was to bulk up an average-to-poor film. But it also managed to make over \$1 billion at the international box office. So who really cares? Certainly not Disney, whose decision to go on and make **Through The Looking Glass** is as surprising as the sun rising in the morning. Or Johnny Depp playing an endearing weirdo. Outside of a confirmed release date of May 17th 2016 and a returning Depp & Mia Wasikowska, details are scant right now (even its director James Bobin wouldn't give us any; see page 13), but it's recently been rumoured that Sacha Baron Cohen is in early talks to join the cast in a villain's role. Because he's British and some stereotypes will never change.

Quite which character he's in negotiations for remains a mystery, though if he does join it'll mark a reunion with not only James Bobin, who worked as a writer/director on various Ali G related projects between 2000-2004, but Depp himself: the pair were last seen together murdering the greater part of London in 2007's **Sweeney Todd**. | ZF

## COMES THE KRAMPUS

It was only last issue we were expressing our amazement at Kevin Smith's newfound passion for movies after threatening to retire from filmmaking only a few years ago. Even more impressive, here we are again, bringing news of a new Smith film for the second month in a row! With creature feature **Tusk**, rapture comedy **Helena Handbag** (see last month) and sequel **Clerks III** in various stages of development, the cult filmmaker has now conceived and co-written **Comes The Krampus**, a Christmas themed anthology horror based on the titular legend (basically a nasty, child-scoffing Santa-like demon). Smith will helm one of the segments himself, alongside a roster that includes co-writer Andy McElfresh, wife Jennifer Schwalbach and long-time sidekick Jason Mewes, who will all make their directing debuts when the movie goes before cameras this April. With chapter titles such as **The Krampus vs. the 3rd Grade** and **Hitler's Krampus**, this just went straight to the top of our Christmas list!

## SNEEK PEEK...



Apologies for the damage to your copy of Starburst. Thing is, we were going to show you an early preview of what Michael Bay's newly rebooted **Ninja Turtles** looked like, but that didn't quite jibe with the Paramount Pictures legal department. Other outlets only had to remove the offending image from their website, we had to physically rip the pic out of every issue, one by one. Took ages. Funny thing is, we can't work out why they were so miffed – we actually thought the redesigns looked ace!



## GHOST IN THE SHELL

The seminal Japanese manga property has been milling around the studio lots of Hollywood for a fair while now. It was first acquired in 2008 by DreamWorks, who planned to shoot it in 3D, and in 2009 *Avatar* writer Laeta Kalogridis was sworn in to whip up a new draft of the script. Then, things went quiet. This month, reports have emerged that the remake has finally got itself a director in Rupert Sanders, last seen making Kristen Stewart look all broody (for a change) in *Snow White and the Huntsman*. Though he may now be working off a script from *Hoax* writer William Wheeler.

*Ghost in the Shell* is like anime scripture and it'll take a very brave filmmaker to stamp his/her mark on it, not to mention make the enormously difficult transition to live-action. For a quick catch up: the story follows cyborg law enforcer Motoko Kusanagi, a member of the Japanese National Public Safety Commission, who specialises in fighting technology-based crime. There's a whole lot of trippy imagery (including plenty of time spent inside machines and brains and whatnot) and some seriously high-concept production design that will only be sated by a few truck-fulls of dollars. A labyrinthine challenge lies ahead for Sanders and co. | ZF

## POSTER MORTEM

The producer of PARANORMAL ACTIVITY and INSIDIOUS presents



You see what it wants you to see.

OCULUS

IN THEATERS SOON

15

Karen Gillan is easy on the eye, so naturally including her on your movie poster is a no-brainer. We have to question the logic of Photoshopping gross little hairy phantom hands over her face though. (Seriously, does this make anybody else a little queasy or is it just us?!)

## AND FINALLY...

Showtime's often talked about *Dexter* spin-off is only happening if Michael C. Hall agrees to star says network President David Nevins, completely misunderstanding what the point of a spin-off actually is.

+++

Disney are getting ready to reintroduce audiences to their adventuring rodents ch-ch-ch-*Chip 'n Dale Rescue Rangers* in a live-action/CG, *Alvin*-rivaling reboot.

+++

The House of Mouse have also begun plans to capitalise on their monstrous box office hit *Frozen*, with a sequel and stage musical already in the works.

+++

Also getting the stage treatment (although we're not quite sure why this would be a good idea), is the time-travel classic *Back to the Future*. Original creators Robert Zemeckis, Bob Gale and Jamie Lloyd will provide the script to the musical (again, *why?*), which will hit the West End in time for the film's 30th anniversary in 2015.

+++

Getting tired of endless spins on the Nazi Zombie trope? Us too. And Universal Pictures knows it. The solution? An adaptation of Robert McCammon's 1989 novel *The Wolf's Hour*. The pitch? Nazi Werewolves! Sorted.

+++

Long rumoured, the increasingly in demand Chris Pratt is now confirmed as *Jurassic World*'s male lead, starring alongside Bryce Dallas Howard and lots of blokes holding tennis balls on sticks.

+++

Oh, speaking of Pratt, that reminds us... Remember when TTC used to be all dismissive about *The LEGO Movie* back when it was first announced years ago? Oh how we mocked! Well, boy do we feel silly now (yes, that is a 10/10 review on page 75 you see). It is then without a modicum of snark that we bring you news that Warner Bros already hired writers to get cracking on a sequel weeks before the first even opened, so sure were they of its success. Cockey.

+++

...But they're not the only ones. 20th Century Fox have already booked July 29th, 2016 for their third *Planet of the Apes* flick ahead of *Dawn*'s release this summer. Director Matt Reeves will once again take the helm.

+++

Murdering monkeys aren't the only apocalyptic menace mankind will have to face that year, we'll also have to contend with surly space shrubs in yet another version of John Wyndham's 1951 novel *The Day of the Triffids*. Ghost House Pictures have selected Mike Newell (*Harry Potter* and *The Goblet of Fire*) to direct, working from a screenplay by *Doctor Who*'s Neil Cross.

+++

Guy Ritchie is in talks to launch a six-film franchise centred around the legend of *King Arthur* for Warner Bros. Good luck with that - Jerry Bruckheimer failed to get audiences interested in *one King Arthur* film back in 2004, let alone half a dozen. And then even had Keira Knightley with a digitally enhanced bosom on the poster!

+++

*Twilight*'s Nikki Reed is set to be terrorised by haunted email in Kelvin Tong's new horror movie... *Email*.

+++

As if challenging Tong for the 'Dullest Title of 2014' crown, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* co-creator Kim Henkel is gearing up to produce... *Found Footage 3D*. Then again, if the intention of the title was to instill a feeling of dread in horror fans sick to the back teeth of lazy found footage flicks and headache-inducing, ineffective 3D, Henkel can consider it a rousing success!

TTC 398 written by Kris Heys with additional stories by Andrew Marshall and Zachary Fox (kris.heids@starburstmagazine.com)

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by Iain Robertson

# THE GREAT MUPPET COMEBACK

They're back! Two years after their glorious return to form, our fuzzy heroes are about to embark on a world tour. En route they'll take on evil doppelgangers, Russian gulags, Ricky Gervais and, scariest of all, Celine Dion power ballads! Starburst raises the curtain on the eagerly awaited sequel...

Disney **MUPPETS**  
MOST WANTED







The release of *Muppets Most Wanted* marks an amazing comeback for the lovable characters who, until recently, hadn't been on the big screen in over a decade. It's hard to believe that an entire generation of children was growing up largely deprived of the joys of over-excited frogs, narcissistic pigs, joke telling bears and badly performed stunts by a, er, whatever the hell Gonzo is.

This sad but true premise formed the basis of the Muppets' brilliant, self-titled 2011 comeback. The film portrayed a world where Kermit and Co were all but forgotten. Then Walter, their last devoted fan, ably assisted by Jason Segal and Amy Adams, reunited them and restored them to their rightful place as light entertainment gods. Oh, it was also funny. Very, very funny.

Although they had fallen out of favour with their target audience, the Muppets weren't as far from the public consciousness as the film would have us believe. Following their classic 1992 take on A Christmas Carol, their popularity, along with the quality of their output, had been in a slow decline. Follow up films, *Muppet Treasure Island* and 1999's *Muppets From Space* weren't in the same league, and the short-lived

*Muppets Tonight* never found the audience it deserved. Following their purchase by Disney in 2004, Kermit and the gang were relegated to occasional appearances on the Disney Channel, where they appeared alongside the likes of the stars of *High School Musical* and a pre clothes-phobic Miley Cyrus. Disney also produced some fairly risible TV movies and the occasional brilliant YouTube video. (If you've never seen their take on Bohemian Rhapsody, stop wasting your time reading this and go watch it right now. Seriously. You'll thank us later.)

Disney however has a canny knack for reviving brands. Both Marvel and Pixar have prospered since their sale to the Mouse House, and the company's forthcoming series of *Star Wars* movies looks set to restore much of the damage done by the divisive prequel trilogy. Such was the case with the Muppets. Their occasional appearances kept them in the public's consciousness, and in 2008, lifelong Muppets fan Jason Segal, along with co-writer Nicholas Stoller began to develop a comeback film for the company.

The resulting film was classic Muppets. Deliberately echoing their earlier films, rather than the later (albeit loose) literary

adaptations and the less than inspired *Muppets From Space*, the film revelled in just letting the Muppets be the Muppets. Loosely inspired by *The Muppet Movie* (1979), which showed how the characters first met, the reboot showed how the gang reformed, getting back together to put on one last show and save their theatre. Bringing in two of the team behind the award winning *Flight of the Conchords*, James Bobin and Bret McKenzie as director and music supervisor respectively, the film grossed over \$165 million, and won McKenzie a Best Original Song Oscar for 'Man or Muppet'. Whilst the odd lapses into (occasionally literal) toilet humour attracted some criticism from some of the original Muppet performers, in particular for Fozzie's 'Fart Shoes', the film was a huge hit with audiences and critics alike. Most importantly, it restored the Muppets to their rightful place in the public's affections, and created a new generation of fans.

A sequel was inevitable. Shortly after the release of *The Muppets*, Disney struck a deal with Bobin and Stoller to develop a new movie. McKenzie, juggling the film with appearances in Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy, also returned. Jason Segal however declined



to reprise his role, either in front or behind the camera, claiming he'd achieved his aim of bringing the Muppets back

For the sequel, which went through the working titles *The Muppets 2* and *The Muppets... Again!* before settling on *Muppets Most Wanted*, a new set of stars were required. As with the first movie, Disney again struck gold, signing up Ricky Gervais for the human lead.

A huge fan of the series, Gervais filmed a cameo for the previous movie, one which didn't make the final cut. Although his casting was seen by some (read: "people on the internet who like to judge films before they're made") as controversial, Gervais is, on form, a brilliant comic actor. *The Office*'s David Brent is easily Britain's greatest comedy character since Steve Coogan first donned a green blazer. Although little of his previous work has been aimed at a family audience, as part of the hugely successful *Night at the Museum* franchise he's hardly unknown to children. And, as a lifelong Muppets fan, he's an actor devoted to making the best film possible.

It's a big leap for Gervais, whose largest previous leading film roles have been in medium budget projects like *Ghost Town* and *The Invention of Lying*, but the comedian is typically confident. "I didn't so much accept it as jump at the chance. I f\*\*\*\*\*g love The Muppets," he wrote on his website. Gervais has thrown himself into the role, not only toning down his language to a more Disney appropriate level, he's even tackled the inevitable song and dance numbers with aplomb. As anyone who ever saw *The Office* knows, his singing and dancing skills are, let's say, somewhat unique. Unfortunately, rumours that he's bringing along his frequent co-star Stephen Merchant as Beaker's brother are sadly unfounded.

As with Gervais' casting, the plot of the sequel is similarly grander. After loosely basing the previous outing on the 'get the gang together' plot of *The Muppet Movie*, the sequel takes its inspiration from their second film, *The Great Muppet Caper*. It sees the Muppets capitalising on their newly restored fame and embarking on a world tour, only to run into all sorts of trouble abroad. Think of it as being like *Taken*, but with more musical numbers and singing chickens.

On their tour, the gang unwittingly get entangled with the world's greatest criminal Constantine, along with his sidekick, the brilliantly named Dominic Badguy (Gervais). By an amazing coincidence, Constantine just happens to be a dead ringer for a certain well-known frog. "We talked about putting me in makeup and having me play both

roles" Kermit told Entertainment Weekly, "but we decided Constantine needed to be a guy who could do a Russian accent. And, you know, I'm a pretty accomplished actor and all, but besides *The Muppet Christmas Carol* and the *Muppet Treasure Island* films, I've only really ever played myself. The great thing is, I have like 3,000 relatives back in the swamp, so it was quite easy to find a frog who could play Constantine."

Unbeknownst to the hapless Muppets, Constantine replaces Kermit, who ends up in a Russian jail, where he encounters feisty guard Nadya, played by another of comedy's biggest stars, *30 Rock*'s Tiny Fey. Also joining the cast is *Modern Family*'s Ty Burrell as an Interpol agent, in a role originally earmarked for *Inglourious Basterds*' Christoph Waltz (who instead appears in a cameo).

Waltz isn't the only star on cameo duties. Following on from appearances from the likes of Dave Grohl, Jack Black and Emily Blunt last time, the sequel boasts cameos from, amongst others (deep breath), Tom Hiddleston, Sean Combs, Lady Gaga, Stanley Tucci, Peter Serafinowicz, Frank Langella, Ray Liotta, Dexter Fletcher, Usher and, yes, Machete himself, Danny Trejo. Oh, and Celine Dion. Well, you can't have everything.

Although the film's international settings include Berlin, Madrid and Paris, *Muppets Most Wanted* was filmed primarily at the UK's Pinewood Studios, as well as several locations in London. Further filming took place in LA, including a recreation of the musical climax of the previous film.

As the film's release has drawn closer, the marketing campaign has kicked into high gear. One of the hallmarks of the first film was a series of brilliant, spot on trailers, which spoofed everything from *Twilight* to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. *Muppets Most Wanted* has had an equally inspired campaign thus far, sending up the unfortunate recent trend for using random quotes plucked from the Internet in trailers. The film has also produced a number of inspired adverts, including one decrying its lack of success at The Golden Globes on the, somewhat unfair basis, that it's not yet been released!

The stellar cast and spot on marketing are encouraging signs that, having recaptured the zeitgeist, the Muppets still have what it takes to stay there. The movie's title is particularly apt. After years in the wilderness, the Muppets are again genuinely Most Wanted. Maybe those Fart Shoes were a good idea after all.







## ABSOLUTE BOBINS!

Words: Ed Fortune



**"I'd really like to bring The Muppet Show back. I think that's something that people would love to see still."**

After successfully re-introducing the world to the Muppets in 2011, filmmaker James Bobin returns to direct the beloved characters once more in this month's **MUPPETS MOST WANTED**. Starburst caught up with the busy writer/director/producer to get the low down...

**Starburst: How different is *Muppets Most Wanted* from the last film?**

James Bobin: It's more of an adventure story, more of a caper movie in many ways. I also wanted to make a film about a big diamond, because I like those '70s *Pink Panther*-style films; I really wanted to make a Muppet film like that. Unlike the movie before where they're bringing the family back together again I thought it would be fun to see what happened next. I love the idea of a world tour with the Muppets showing everyone what they could do.

**It's looks to have a very Ealing comedy feel to it, was that intentional?**

Yes, to a degree. I love the Ealing comedies, though the Muppets have their own sort of thing anyway, they're very much part of the history of entertainment. Whenever I write them I try and stay along traditional lines, bringing in the contemporary sense of humour with traditional style gags. It also means that the performance level makes the movie feels quite big, which makes it interesting for the actors. A lot of comedy seems to be very nuanced these days whereas The Muppets tend to be quite up front.

**Did you have anyone in mind when you wrote the script?**



You always have an image in your mind to a degree, you always have a voice in mind. Ricky Gervais has been in my mind for a



long time, he was actually in our first Muppet film but sadly it was cut. I knew he could do it and I'd seen him interact with the Muppets before. I also knew he'd done a brilliant thing with Elmo a few years before which was really funny. I thought he really gets Muppets and has a really great feeling for them. It's very important to have that natural empathy. Working with puppets is quite a complicated thing to do because you have to directly connect with the puppet rather than the guy operating the puppet. Tina [Fey] of course is an obvious choice because she is so brilliant and Ty [Burrell] like-wise. It was fun to work with these people and find out that they're as good as you thought they'd be!

**Compared to your previous film and television work, are there certain challenges unique to making a Muppet movie?**

Muppets are incredibly complex in terms of how you shoot them because of course they're literally pieces of felt and fur operated by a human hand. When you're trying to compose shots it's a very complex procedure to try and create this illusion that they are alive and living in world where humans and Muppets happily co-exist. So there's quite a strict grammar of how you can and can't shoot them. Occasionally you get things like full body shots where you shoot the entirety of the body - the head, the legs and the torso. Those are interesting because Kermit in those shots is only two and half feet tall because that's his height. You watch Kermit in a close up and we only see the upper part of his body you'll notice that his head is often at human chest height which is about five foot tall so obviously there's a certain amount of illusion going on to achieve that. You have to be very careful about the shot selection you make and obviously the sequence of the shots. These films are heavily storyboarded because without those guidelines it would be very, very hard to do. You have to be very precise in your planning as to how you actually shoot these things.

**Does that break the magic?**

Not really. It's that funny thing that when you're working with them I really feel like I know a guy called Kermit and I also know a guy called Steve [Whitmire - Kermit's puppeteer]. The puppeteers are so skilled at doing this that they really make the puppets come to life. It really doesn't take anything away from them that you see the person performing the puppet. My daughter who is five comes to set and will hang out with Kermit but obviously Kermit will effectively be a half body puppet on Steve's arm and Steve would be operating him about a foot away and talking in his normal voice. But my daughter would never, ever look at Steve, she'd look at Kermit. She totally believes that Kermit is real and just happens to be an extension of Steve. I don't think she acknowledges that he's there. The magic is always still there and they feel very much alive. When you're directing them it's very hard not to direct the puppets. Obviously you always talk to the actors beneath them but sometimes you can't actually see the puppeteers, so in a way it's easier just to talk to Statler and Waldorf!

**Where do you go as a director after you've worked with a superstar such as Kermit the Frog?**

What's left in the world? I've always enjoyed comedy and I have comedy background. I love good storytelling and I love telling good stories. Who knows? I'm currently scheduled to shoot *Alice Through The Looking Glass* for Disney, this summer. I'm a huge Lewis Carroll fan. Having done two films for the Muppets now it's been an absolute pleasure. I was a huge fan as a kid so to get to work with them is amazing. People say never work with your heroes, but that's not true in this case. People like Fozzy really molded my sense of humour and that's influenced me throughout my entire life. Muppets have always been part of the basic tenets of what I find amusing so it's been a great privilege to write lines for them.

**The Muppets have a very anarchic feel to them. How much of that is scripted and how much is improvised?**

It's a bit of both. Largely that's because when such a diverse group of characters come together that's going to happen. Individually, the Muppets are terrible at what they do; Fozzy is a terrible comedian and Gonzo can't do the stuntman thing and Kermit can barely keep it together, but when they're united they have this great sense of 'we can do it if we work together!' But there's borderline chaos the entire time because of who they are. It's implicit in their characters but there's no harm in putting them in situations where that's going to come to the fore. You always try and put them in situations that are dramatic, emotional, interesting or humorous and obviously that then takes over. It's a question of using the script to direct them in a certain way.

**You mentioned you were directing 2016's *Alice in Wonderland* sequel *Through The Looking Glass* next, are you allowed to tell us any more about that?**

It's top, top secret. Shooting will be England and I'm currently working on the script. I'm a huge Lewis Carroll fan and he's one of the originators of the English sense of humour. He's part of a long line of humourists and satirists. His work still stands up today which is incredible when you consider that it's 150 years later! Lewis Carroll,



Edward Lear, Monty Python - it's all a line of English Surrealist humour that I really love. I'm looking forward in getting into that. It's going to be a film I make for myself and my children, much like I did with the Muppets.

### Which is your favourite Muppet?

You can't ask me that question, that's like asking me to pick a favourite child! Right now it's not really Kermit because Kermit has my job. He's the one that has to sort everything out, get things together and put the show on. As a kid I've always been a fan of the secondary, slightly weirder characters, such as Bobby Benson and his Baby Band. They're really kind of funny and kind of dark.

### Are you planning to make any more Muppet Movies?

I really feel like I've gotten to know them, so I'd love to make more. I'd really like to bring *The Muppet Show* back. I think that's something that people would love to see still. When we make the films I always feel like we try to put as many sketches and skits into it as we can. I think that people always respond well to that. It's a case of finding the time and people inclined to make it. I do think there's a room for a Muppet show on TV today. The world still needs a Muppet Show!



## PREPARE THE STANDARD 'RICH AND FAMOUS' CONTRACT...

Words: Ed Fortune



**"Everybody involved were extraordinary Muppet fans, so there's a sense of obligation to make sure that we put something together that inspires the same kind of feeling that we all had when we were children."**

Mandeville Films' co-founder Todd Lieberman has produced movies as diverse as *THE FIGHTER* and *BEVERLY HILLS CHIHUAHUA*. More importantly, he's also the gentleman we all have to thank for getting both *THE MUPPETS* and *MUPPETS MOST WANTED* onto our screens! We sat down with the acclaimed film producer to talk about working with Kermit and the gang...

### Starburst: What does it take to produce a Muppet movie?

Todd Lieberman: No movie is an easy movie to produce, and the Muppet movies are special. These characters have been around for a very long time, crossing many generations. I think you have to have childlike enthusiasm and a love for humour that appeals to kids and adults. You need an enormous amount of patience and a giant amount of energy.

### How difficult is it to get the right sort of team together for a project like this?

The interesting thing about the Muppets is that they're kind of a magnet. It's less about me as a producer looking for a new thing and more about seeing who wants to be involved. There's so many fans of the Muppets and for *Muppets Most Wanted* everybody involved were extraordinary fans of the characters and have a sense of obligation to make sure that we put something





together that inspires the same kind of feeling that we all had when we were children.

**Muppets Most Wanted is very much a caper film, what made you choose that approach for the sequel?**

When we were thinking about the story we really wanted something that would be a great progression from *The Muppets*. That movie kind of brought the gang back together. Now that the stage was set, we felt there was an opportunity for re-acclimating the characters to a generation of kids who maybe aren't as familiar with them than prior generations. Like mine. We just wanted to have an enormous amount of fun and keep the heart and soul of it together. It's a good old fashioned romp. We realised it would be fun to take them to Europe and with James Bobin and [co-writer] Nicholas Stoller who came up with the idea of stealing the Crown Jewels and this whole comedy of errors with Kermit's doppelganger. Shooting it in London was a homecoming for the Muppets because that's where the original show was shot all those years ago when *The Muppet Show* was on the air. It was a bit of a thank you to the UK and also an excuse to take them out of LA and travel around the world a little bit.

**How different is putting together a Muppet movie from any other feature?**

The technical aspects are certainly different. You have to build the set in an entirely different way for Muppets. The performers who operate the characters need room so everything is built off the ground so the performers can walk around and be active. When working in the real world you can't raise the level of the set so you're always figuring out ways to hide people. The way it is shot stylistically is all up to James and he is a brilliant man. The movie also has original music and we were lucky enough to get Bret McKenzie back who did most of the songs for our first film. He's a massive Muppets fan and a genius in the world of music. There's also a lot of cameos because people always want to be a part of a movie like this. We're lucky enough to have lots and lots of people who want to be involved, some of whom are very surprising. I can't wait to see how the public responds. We also have a great cast; I don't think there's a bigger Muppet fan in the world than Ricky Gervais, though Tina Fey and Ty Burrell are also huge fans. Those three alone are comic dynamite together!

**How hard is it to keep a straight face when on set?**

I've got to tell you, it's not easy. The great thing about all the performers who do the Muppets characters is that once the camera stops rolling they're still performing and the amount of laughs that get generated even after the camera stops is unparalleled. Ricky and Mat Vogel, the performer who does Constantine, Kermit's doppelganger, they almost established their own relationship as a duo off screen. As did Ricky and Pepe the Prawn, who is operated by Bill Berrata. They would be hanging out after the camera's had stopped rolling and it would be hysterical.

**When on set did you ever catch yourself talking directly to the Muppet rather than the puppeteer?**

I always try to look through the eyes of a child. When a child is on set they don't even notice the people are there, they're just looking right at the Muppet. It's kind of what you do. Because in truth these Muppet characters are real. They have their own personalities. You don't think there is a person because your mind won't let you. The performers really are so incredibly talented and the Muppets really are that special.

**If the 7 year old version of yourself could meet you now, what would you say to him?**

I play that game with myself all the time. I go higher. I play myself at 90. I go into a meditative state and I imagine myself at 90-years-old. The one thing I continually say to myself is 'no regrets'. There's that maybe clichéd phrase of 'say yes to life' but I fully subscribe to it. The greatest things in life that have happened to me have come from saying yes. I like to experience things and try things. Taking it all the way back to the Muppets, I'm extremely thankful, grateful and lucky that I'm a part of this brand because it truly was something that was very special to me as child.

**Where do you draw your inspiration from?**

Well my main goal in life is to make sure I'm involved in things, storytelling and other wise, that effect people in a certain way and give people a certain sense of emotion and joy. So in terms of specific storytelling I try to find projects and stories that appeal to me on an emotional level and when they're revealed to an audience will move those people to laughter, move them to tears, and move them to laughter and tears at the same time. I genuinely find joy in giving other people emotional satisfaction and joy. That's what inspires me.

**What is your next great ambition?**

I'm always on a quest for knowledge. I don't have a tangible goal but every day of my life I do my best to grow as human being. Now we're getting real existential. I like learning about people and the world. It enhances my storytelling capabilities and my enjoyment of the world. I don't exactly know what is next but I know every experience I go through I try and find something that will allow me to grow.

**What do you have planned for the future of the Muppets?**

I'm extremely superstitious so my philosophy on films and life in general is that I should only think about what's going on at the moment. So right now we've got this movie coming out and I just hope that lots and lots of people go see it and love it like we all do!



*MUPPETS MOST WANTED opens in UK cinemas March 28th.*





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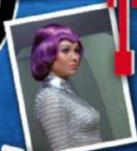
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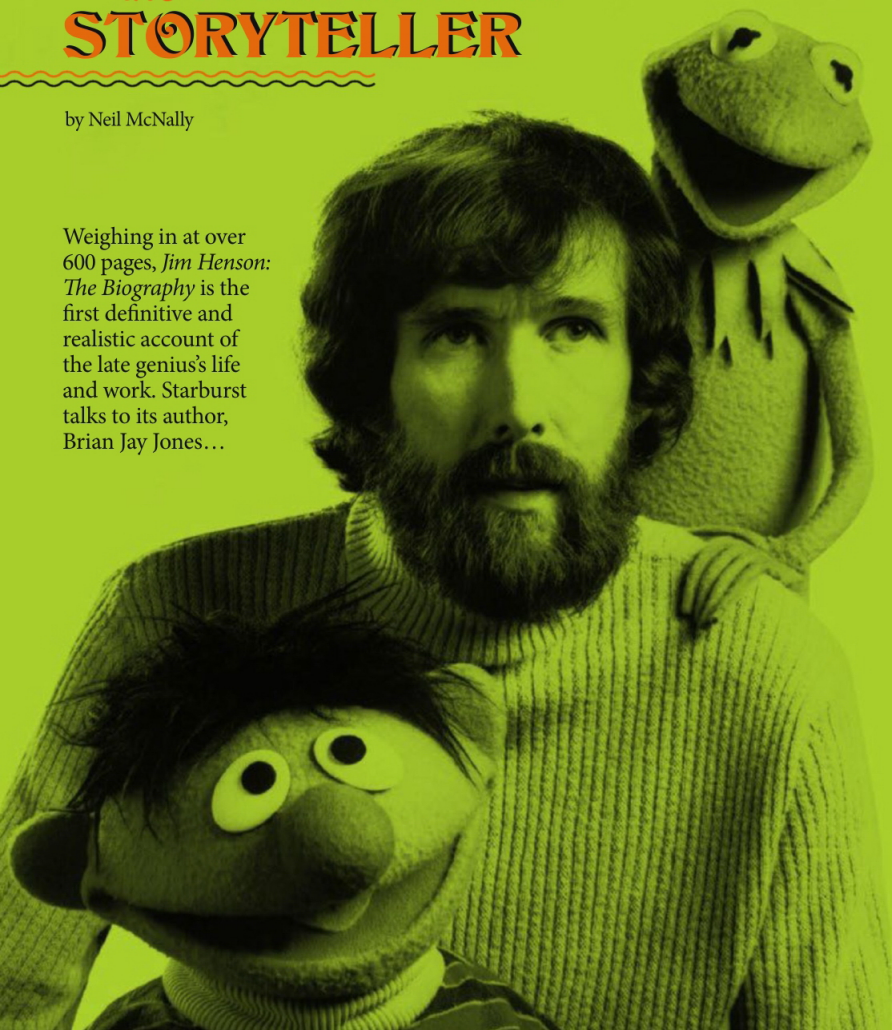
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# *the* STORYTELLER

by Neil McNally

Weighing in at over 600 pages, *Jim Henson: The Biography* is the first definitive and realistic account of the late genius's life and work. Starburst talks to its author, Brian Jay Jones...



## Starburst: Can you tell us what the initial genesis of this project was?

Brian Jay Jones: First of all I'm a fan from way back. I was two when *Sesame Street* came on [in 1969]. I was eight when *The Muppet Show* premiered. So, Jim and the Muppets were always in my life. After I finished my first biography, which was Washington Irving, who was also sort of a pop culture figure, I was thinking about who else kind of occupies that same space nowadays. I was reading something about Jim on Wikipedia of all places and I was like, "I wonder where they got that." So, I was scrolling down to the bottom to see if there was a source. Everything was like *Jim Henson: The Works*, *Jim Henson: Designs and Doodles*. There was a ton of stuff about the work and rightfully so. But, that was the point I realised I didn't ever remember seeing a biography. So I got in touch with The Jim Henson Legacy, which is the organisation that Jane Henson [Jim's wife] and Jim's professional colleagues put together after he died to perpetuate Jim and his work, and just sort of started the conversation with them from there. I said, "I think it's probably time to do this." It had been almost twenty years at that point and a lot of different players had passed on. It was a two year conversation, we sort of all got to know each other, and in 2010 that was when I finally got my yes, and once you have your yes you're sort of a made man at that point!

## How did you begin your initial research into Jim's life?

The first person I talked to was Jane Henson for, I think, almost all day in New York. For was actually a great place to start, although I didn't realise it at the time, because she really wanted to talk about everything that happened prior to Jim becoming Jim Henson. Sitting down with her was really great for getting the early days context. She really sort of built me that chronology. The other big thing I did right away was I sat down with Karen Falk, the archivist at The Jim Henson Company, and started getting some of the sort of big key documents, and then I would go up to the archives for about a week at a time over the next three years. Karen's great - I would go in and say, "Give me every box from 1965-1969!" They'd set me up in an office, and I'd wet stagger in with eight boxes of stuff because Jim just saved everything.

**Other than Jane Henson, who else stood out from the numerous interviews you conducted?** So, I did Jane, I did all five of the kids... I got Frank Oz several times. He's so great because he's really modest. I was scared to death of him because he's got this reputation as sort of a curmudgeon, and he's actually a sweetheart. Really wants to talk about Jim, really enjoys talking about Jim and the work. He was always like, "I don't know why people want to talk to me. Why do people care what I think?" I was like, "Um, Mr. Lennon, this is a book about Mr. McCartney!" I got Dave Goetz too. I actually got to see him and Steve Whitmire perform Gonzo and Kermit and a number of characters while they were filming an 'OK Go' video. I got the last interview I think ever with

[puppeteer] Jerry Nelson. I talked with tons of people: [puppeteer] Louise Gold, Peter Harris, the director of *The Muppet Show*, David Odell, the writer on *The Dark Crystal*... There were interviews in the archives that had never been used before, as well, that I had at my disposal. The hardest part was, Jim's not one of these guys who sat down for interviews a lot, so you really had to scour a lot of the newspapers and see if you can find a little nugget from Jim on stuff and him talking about his work. There's a lot of places to find Jim, but he's not one of these guys that sat down a lot.

## You used the comparison of Lennon-McCartney to explain the working relationship of Jim and Frank Oz. Can you elaborate on that?

Yeah, you know, I didn't equate it this way in the book, but I really do sort of consider them Lennon-McCartney, in that they bring out the best of each other, and play, and help compensate for each other's weaknesses. Like Jim could have a tendency, although not usually, at times could have a tendency to get too sweet. There's a moment in the book where they're doing *The Muppet Movie* and Jim says, "We need to redeem Doc Hopper," and Frank Oz says "Bull\*\*\*\*!" You don't redeem the villain, you've got to keep them the villain!" Only Oz could say that to him, and Jim on the other hand was the one who kept Oz from being so serious. Oz is one of these guys, you look in the archives, when he would get a character he would write out these elaborate backstories for them... and Jim's the one who was like, "Come on, come out and play!" Jon Stone [director of *Sesame Street*] called it a perfect marriage, and I think it really is.

## Was there anything you found out that surprised you about Jim?

You know, the really cool thing about him is he's pretty much what you expect him to be. It's funny because some of the earlier reviews that had come out, people were like, "My God! This is going to be a whitewash. Nobody is this nice." I was talking to Frank Oz about this and I said, "It kind of makes me sad when people are disappointed when their idols don't disappoint them." [Laughs] Jim really is a genuinely good guy. He did care about people's feelings, and that's probably the reason he didn't fight with people. Talking about what surprised me, one of those things that really surprised me was the extent to how pathologically conflict averse the guy was. People loved to work with him and wanted to please him. Wherever he was [people] felt loved and special.

## Why do you feel, 23 years after he passed, people are still fascinated by him?

First of all you make the association. You think of Jim, you think of the Muppets, you think of Emmett Otter, you think of the Fraggles. All these things you have very warm associations with. But, the reason you have those warm associations is because Jim sort of infused himself into all those creations and into all the

things he did. That's a really good place to be! It's like with Walt Disney... People who were born long after Jim passed, they know what he looks like, they know what he sounds like. A ton of people they see that face and they go, "Oh, that's Jim." Even after he passed, when you would see a movie that would say "Creatures Provided by Jim Henson's Creature Shop" you knew you were in for something, his name had that association already with it. Have I answered the question... I don't know. People respond to the warmth of those characters.

## In closing, if you could say anything to Jim Henson what would it be?

If he were still alive the question I would literally ask him is, "What's next?" This is the guy, he's got the biggest show in the world with *The Muppet Show*, he's like, "It was a very nice show," and walks away to go do movies! *Fraggle Rock*, biggest show on HBO... Jim says, again, "A very nice show," pulls it off the air. He had that ability to just walk away. Amazing! When he was selling the company, he said "I'm giving the Muppets to Disney to let them take care of now. I'm going to go do something else." I have no idea what he was going to do next! So, if I could ask him anything that would be "What's next? What are you thinking about?" because you never knew what you were going to hear.

JIM HENSON: THE BIOGRAPHY is available now from Virgin Books.

neil.mcnally@starburstmagazine.com





# LIFE'S LIKE A MOVIE

BY JACK BOTTOMLEY



The Muppets' cinematic journey is paved with golden bricks, evil entrepreneurs and alien visitations. So it is with an arched brow and an upbeat song in our hearts, that we look at Jim Henson's pop culture icons and how they made it in Hollywood. It may not be easy being green but Kermit and co. have made stardom look simple! So join Starburst on a journey (by map if you like), as we look back at the gang's hilarious misadventures on film...

The Muppets' first taste of the silver screen came amidst their TV glory days, between series three and four of *The Muppet Show*, when its writers Jerry Juhl and Jack Burns penned *The Muppet Movie* (1979). Henson Associates produced the feature, choosing James Frawly (*The Big Bus*) to direct, a fact that actually caused a bit of an anti-cheery atmosphere during the films production, with difficulties forming among the Muppet's core crew and the 'newbie' Frawly. Still, *The Muppet Movie* was a brilliant way to start 'The Muppets' onscreen saga, drawing on the series motifs to create its own brand of self-referential and meta humour, thus setting the standard for future features. The plot saw Kermit and his newly acquired friends head to Hollywood in a quest for fame and fortune, with villainous restaurant entrepreneur Doc Hopper (Charles Dunning) on their tail.



A metaphor for Henson's own trials and tribulations in achieving his goals, the debut film was indeed a triumph. *The Muppet Movie* was released in the UK on May 31st 1979, and June 22nd in the US, scoring highly positive reviews and Box Office returns. To this day it's still the second highest grossing Muppet movie with a \$76 million haul. Introducing an array of cameos from the likes of Steve Martin, Mel Brooks and Orson Welles, behind-the-scenes was equally star-studded with a young John Landis and Tim Burton (you may have heard of them) being among the puppeteers helping with proceedings, mostly in the film's grand musical finale.

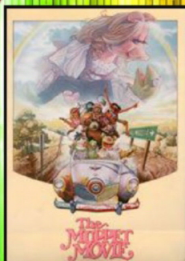
Well, as the saying goes, if at first you succeed, do it all over again! (Wait, is that a saying?) And so, in 1981, *The Great Muppet Caper* arrived. Shot in England and with a story specific to the setting, the film continued the fuzzy friends' cinematic adventures. *Caper* was the only Muppet film directed by Jim Henson himself and was released on June 26th 1981 (shortly after the final series of *The Muppet Show*). Kermit, Fozzie Bear and Gonzo played reporters covering the headline grabbing theft of a fashion designer's necklace. They travelled to England to interview the victim of the theft, Lady Holiday (Diana Rigg) and consequently set about helping her (and her secretary Miss Piggy) in the investigation.

This film made Miss Piggy's role a lot larger and her show-stopping underwater musical number was among the most difficult scenes shot in Muppet history, with puppeteer Frank Oz undertaking three days of scuba diving lessons in preparation. The film

continued the textbook Muppet mode of humour, offering zany, reference heavy meta comedy (see the opening gag about the B.S.C - British Society of Cinematographers) and yet more cameos (John Cleese and Peter Ustinov) to detectable effect. *The Great Muppet Caper*, despite a mostly warm reception, was considered a lesser effort than the first film, with praise for the family appeal but criticism towards an overdone story. Still, the movie grossed \$31.2 million domestically (making this the fourth highest grossing Muppet film).

On the way to the next Muppet film, Henson and Frank Oz co-directed cult fantasy *The Dark Crystal* (1982), which was scripted by writer David Odell and backed by British company ITC Entertainment, both of whom were instrumental to *The Muppet Show*. Back to the Muppetverse though and as fate would have it, *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984) was the last film of the sole Jim Henson Muppets era, before Disney entered into the franchise. Originally intended for a 1983 release, Jay Tarses and Tom Patchett's script was revised by Frank Oz (who directs here) after he thought the original script was "over jokey." (Huh?)

*The Muppets Take Manhattan* was the first Muppet film ITC didn't back (due to financial issues) and was released by TriStar. As a result, it is one of only three Muppet flicks that Sony controls the distribution rights to - the others being *Muppets From Space* (1999) and *Kermit's Swamp Years* (2002). The plot concerned Kermit and the gang going to New York in an attempt to stage their musical on Broadway. The film is an iconic instalment for numerous reasons; for







starts it introduced (via a dream sequence) the Muppet Babies, who would go on to get their own animated series shortly after, which ran from 1984-1990 (see page 26 for more). The film also saw the first leading role for franchise favourite Rizzo the Rat!

*Manhattan* drew better reviews than the last, offering smarter plotting and dialogue. Interestingly, this was the first movie where the Muppets *didn't* break the fourth wall and acknowledge they were in a movie. Though not expanding on the previous film, *Manhattan* domestically performed well, taking \$25.5 million on an \$8 million budget. It featured cameos from an un-sweary Joan Rivers, John Landis and Brooke Shields (Dustin Hoffman would have been amongst them, but had to drop out).

In the late 1980s Jim Henson and Disney were in negotiations over the company taking over his productions and consequently The Muppets themselves. However, Henson's tragic death in May 1990 from organ failure led to a cease in talks. Disney was invested in the idea of owning The Muppets brand but had to co-produce the next films, in what is often referred to as 'the Disney era'. So, 8 years later, The Muppets graced the big screen once again in an adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Lovingly dedicated to Jim Henson and fellow puppeteer Richard Hunt (who portrayed Scooter and Beaker among many others), Brian Henson's *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992) is perhaps the most emotional of all Muppet adventures. In fact, Michael Caine, who here stars as Ebenezer Scrooge, has called it one of his most memorable performances. We couldn't agree more –

Caine made for a terrific human lead in this now classic, heart-warming festive picture.

Though doing solid business, the film struggled in its optimistic release slot, competing with Disney's own *Aladdin* and *Home Alone 2*. Still, the film made \$27 million on a \$12 million budget. Initial reviews were favourable but hardly the best of the series, yet over the years this has become one of the most beloved Muppet movies, and is officially ranked as one of audience's favourite Christmas films of all time.

On the way to *Treasure Island*, the straight-to-home-video *Muppet Classic Theater* was released on September 27th 1994. Directed by David Grossman (*George of the Jungle 2*), the film saw Rizzo and Gonzo narrate a string of six fairy tale stories retold by the Muppets: *Three Little Pigs*, *King Midas*, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *The Elves & The Shoemaker*. It isn't remembered often, which is precisely why it's worthy of a mention here. However, the next (peg) leg of the cinematic journey was 1996's *Muppet Treasure Island*, which was again based on a classic story – this time Robert Louis Stevenson's timeless swashbuckler. Much like *A Christmas Carol*, Brian Henson returned to direct and the Muppets take on this story was another fun folly.

*Treasure Island* is a unique Muppet film in many ways and this can be seen in their actual screen time. It may have generally received better reviews than *Christmas Carol* but many thought the Muppets were less the main attraction than the story was.





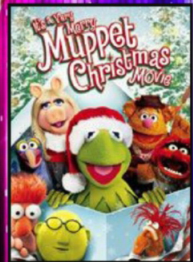
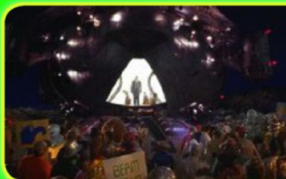
In fact it took 30 minutes for Kermit to be introduced, and over an hour for Miss Piggy! *Treasure Island* starred comedic talents like Tim Curry, Kevin Bishop, Billy Connolly and Jennifer Saunders, and though cameos were in short supply, Brian Henson's wife Ellis Flyte made an uncredited appearance as the charmingly named 'Big Fat Ugly Bug-Faced Baby-Eating O'Brian.' Aw, bless! The film boasted fancy set design and amusing musical sequences and did good business at the box office too, becoming the first Muppet film to open at Number 1, grossing \$34 million domestically (the third highest take of the series).

*Muppets from Space* (1999) would be the last Muppet film to grace the big-screen until 2011, and also marked the first, since Jim Henson's passing, that wasn't based on existing source material. The plot saw Gonzo contacted by his long-lost alien family (an idea which would forever polarise fans), but when he's kidnapped by a shady government agency, it's up to his friends to rescue him.

The film was originally intended for an early 2000 release but production was rushed for summer 1999, which hurt the film's advertising and led to it facing insurmountable competition in Disney's *Tarzan* and *Inspector Gadget*. Such a marketing decision makes about as much sense as a deep philosophical debate between Swedish Chef and Beaker, and the results were just as unfortunate for the movie. *Space* delivered the first financial flop for the franchise, failing to even meet its \$24 million budget. Reviews were equally mixed, with many citing the film lacked wit and the magical quality of prior films. In many

ways though, *Muppets from Space* was a momentous occasion as it marked the last time Muppet regular Frank Oz was involved. This was also, strangely, the first Muppet film not to be released with a musical structure and original songs, and instead the movie's soundtrack was comprised of existing hits and cover versions. Despite being different in many ways to other Muppet films, the film did boast the usual array of celebrity cameos, with the likes of wrestler Hulk Hogan, David Arquette and Ray Liotta putting in an appearance. Additionally, some big actors like Andie MacDowell, Jeffrey Tambor and Pat Hingle (better known as Commissioner Gordon in the 1989-1997 *Batman* film series) played more substantial roles in the film.

The years that followed *Muppets from Space* are generally considered the lesser of the Muppet saga. This is often attributed (rather unfairly) to the failure of said movie. While it wasn't the best of the series by any means, it was hardly a complete disaster. Forgoing the term 'lesser years', let's instead call this the 'small screen era'. In 2002 straight-to-home-video prequel *Kermit's Swamp Years* was released, and told the tale of a 12 year-old Kermit aspiring to leave the swamplands and do something with his life. It's an innocent enough entry but long time fans were left wanting the same intelligent writing and vibrant heart. Christmas 2002 saw the premiere of the NBC feature-length TV special, Kirk R. Thatcher's *It's a Very Merry Muppet Christmas Movie*. That was a better offering, utilising a neat homage to Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. The film also fared better with reviews and featured a somewhat impressive cast, including



Whoopi Goldberg, William H. Macy and Mel Brooks, as well as cameos by the likes of Snoop Dogg. In 2004 Disney purchased the rights to The Muppets, excluding those characters created for *Sesame Street* and *Fraggle Rock*.

Despite now having the weight of Disney behind the franchise, it was still a few years before Kermit and co. returned to our screens. First were Kirk R. Thatcher's *The Muppets' Wizard of Oz* (2005) and *A Muppets Christmas: Letters To Santa* (2008). Filmed in 2004 and altered by ABC into an interpretation of L. Frank Baum's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* rather than the 1939 picture, *The Muppets' Wizard of Oz* is widely considered amongst fans the worst Muppet movie ever made, mostly due to its uneasy attempt to appeal to a more mature audience. The jokes/references to films like *Kill Bill* and *Apocalypse Now* aren't the best of ideas, nor were some of the celebrity cameos (Kelly Osbourne "graced" the extended version). *A Muppets Christmas: Letters To Santa* (2008) fared a bit better, drawing some praise from reviews and better cameos in Uma Thurman and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg (as filming took place in Brooklyn and Manhattan).

Following this period of big screen inactivity, Jason Segal and Nicholas Stoller (writers of the successful rom-com *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*) met with Disney in 2008, and began to discuss making an "old school Muppets" film. Originally titled *The Greatest Muppet Movie of All Time!* the film went through various rewrites in the subsequent years;

from being based on an unused 1985 Jerry Juhl screenplay, to a script-honing meeting with Pixar. Frank Oz was also originally to be involved but dropped out due to being unsure of Disney's handling of the film. After seeing the finished product however, he was far more positive, stating, "I thought the film was really sweet and fun, a little too safe, a little retro... But the main thing is everybody got back to appreciating The Muppets". The final plot saw Muppet fan Walter, his human brother Gary (writer Segal himself) and Gary's girlfriend Mary (Amy Adams), encourage The Muppets to get back together and save their theatre from being demolished by an evil oil tycoon Tex Richman (Chris Cooper).

*The Muppets* marked the resurgence of the franchise, drawing upon the series/film's past events to fuel the fires of a nostalgic comeback picture (ignoring the small screen era movies). The film re-introduced familiar faces (Animal's story in particular was sheer genius - DRUMS) but in addition saw the resurgence of old characters like Uncle Deadly (not seen for 20 years) and brand new characters like Walter and sleazy rip-off act The Moopets. *The Muppets* was an enormous success, grossing \$88 million domestically and a massive \$165 million worldwide, marking the first time a Muppets film crossed the \$100 million mark and making it the highest grossing of any of their features. Likewise, the critical response was almost universally positive, garnering the best all round reviews of the entire franchise, and an Oscar win (a Muppet first!), for Bret McKenzie's song 'Man or Muppet.'

As has come to be expected, the film was littered with cameos from the likes of Dave Grohl, Ken

Jeong, Sarah Silverman, Kristen Schaal, Emily Blunt, Selena Gomez, Neil Patrick Harris, Rico Rodriguez (who?), Zach Galifianakis and, most prominently, Jack Black.

Disney had proved the perfect home for the Muppets after all, with the studio's heavy promotion paying off big-time (characters appeared on *The X-Factor* in the UK, hosted an episode of the wrestling show WWE Raw and released countless parody trailers/posters online prior to release). The future was as bright as the stage lights for Henson's creatures once again, in what was a phoenix from the ashes moment in cinema. Even Sam the Eagle might say it had a socially redeeming value!

And here we are, in 2014, an incredible 35 years after *The Muppet Movie* and audiences (old and new) are still cheering Henson's iconic characters on. On March 28th, *Muppets Most Wanted* is released and it looks to be continuing the Muppets own eccentric and endearing style of comedy. This style of filmmaking may well be considered old school and by modern CGI standards it is, but what's wrong with that? Kermit, Piggy, Fozzie, Gonzo, Animal and co. prove "old school" is still cool. No matter how much Statler and Waldorf (and their real-life equivalents) have mocked, these characters have stood the test of time. As the song 'Finale: The Magic Store' (from *The Muppet Movie*) says... "Keep believing, keep pretending; we've done just what we've set out to do, thanks to the lovers, the dreamers, and you!"

Wocka, Wocka!







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# MAKE YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE

by Vanessa Berben

## MUPPET Babies

**THE MUPPET BABIES live on in our memory, if not in our DVD players. Starburst pays tribute to Jim Henson's long lost series...**

**A**iring from 1984 to 1991, *Jim Henson's Muppet Babies* consistently tops favourite lists in the U.S., U.K. and Australia. Ranked as one of the best animated television series of all time, it's understandable that fans are eager for a comprehensive DVD release. Unfortunately, it doesn't appear this will happen any time soon for the four-time Emmy award winning animated show.

The *Muppet Babies* were born following 1984's *Muppets Take Manhattan*. In the film, Miss Piggy wonders what it would have been like if she and Kermit had grown up together. A dream sequence then follows, where a baby Piggy sings and baby-versions of Kermit, Gonzo, Fozzie, Rowlf, and Scooter appear. This fantasy sequence was so popular with fans that

Henson turned the idea into a 30-minute cartoon and added baby-versions of Animal, Bunsen Honeydew, and Beaker; he also introduced new characters Nanny and Skeeter.

Henson's idea paid off, as the show was a hit with fans and spanned eight seasons. Centering on the babies and told entirely from their perspective, a faceless Nanny takes care of them as they pass the time using their imaginations to go on crazy adventures. The power of creativity has always been a hallmark of Henson Productions, and what makes *Muppet Babies* so exciting for us as Henson and Muppets fans is the level to which the animated show takes it. A room as safe and classic as a nursery becomes something other-worldly and completely limitless.

There are two men who should be considered instrumental in bringing Henson's creative vision for the *Muppet Babies* to life. Jeffrey Scott, a screenwriter for animation, developed the show for television and served as sole writer during seasons one through three. Scott left the show after 1986 – the same year Dave Coulier took over the voices of Animal and Bunsen from Howie Mandel – coincidence? Probably, but we can dream of diva catfights amongst friends and Muppets if we want.

Prism award-winner Hank Saroyan can be thanked for the incredibly fun songs featured in the episodes. He served as voice director and song producer for all eight seasons and briefly took over as head writer when Scott left the show. Saroyan would later go on to create *Geo Kids* for *National Geographic*.



So why is this amazing show so hard to find now, when many of the children who benefited from going on adventures with the babies are parents and would love to pass their love for the show down to their kids? Unfortunately, it's all about rights and royalties. The sense of camaraderie between Jim Henson, Steven Spielberg, and George Lucas that fans have benefited from over the years is sort of the same friendship that keeps *Muppet Babies* from being released as a full collection.

It's episodes, like season one's *'Raiders of the Lost Muppet'* that feature live shots from *Indiana Jones* and *the Temple of Doom* (marking the only time during the series that an adult character's face is seen) and season eight's *Nice to Have Gnome You* which not only extensively features *The Labyrinth* but contains clips from *The Witches* as well, that makes a current DVD release a pipe dream. Even something we'd think of as harmless and nostalgic, like season two's *'I Want my Muppet TV!'* which featured a guest appearance by Johnny Carson and used a clip of Ed McMahon and his famous catchphrase

"Heeeeere's Johnny!" or season four's *'The House that Muppet Built'* featuring Dick Clark and *The \$25,000 Pyramid* are now factors in why a comprehensive release is currently out of our grasp, a fact incredibly disheartening to fans everywhere of this wildly popular show.

*Muppet Babies* was so popular that in its second season Henson was surprisingly unsuccessful trying to expand the concept. Calling it *Muppets, Babies & Monsters*, the program was developed to include a second show, *Jim Henson's Little Muppet Monsters*, which attempted to introduce three new Muppet characters: Tug, Boo, and Molly. They were Muppet-kids living in the adult-Muppets' home, sent to the basement to hang out with Scooter. The three of them begin producing fake TV shows that only air on the other television sets inside the house.

*Little Muppet Monsters* never really seemed to grab viewers' attention and the project was abandoned after only three episodes aired.

While short-lived, *Little Muppet Monsters* did introduce a few ideas that stuck with *Muppet Babies*. The instrumental theme music of *Muppets, Babies & Monsters* became the closing credits theme of *Muppet Babies*. It was also given a final tribute by *Muppet Babies* when two of *Little Muppet Monsters'* animated segments, *'Pigs in Space'* and *'Kermit the Frog, Private Eye'* were used in the *Muppet Babies'* final episode.

With *Little Muppet Monsters* off the schedule, *Muppet Babies* began airing double-episodes. When *The Garbage Pail Kids* cartoon failed to even make it to air before it was cancelled, *Muppet Babies* once again stepped in - the show was expanded to 90 minutes and hotter than ever. Of course with all that popularity, there inevitably comes the ridiculous merchandise! Collectors should be on the lookout for more than just toys - there were albums, calendars, board games, even a line of erasers. And for the diehard fan, see if you can track down the lamps, original Halloween costumes, or the bath sets.





When you think about it, it's interesting that *Little Muppet Monsters* didn't take off the way *Muppet Babies* did. It very well may have been due to a lack of defined concepts, which can turn even the most die-hard of viewers away. But the core message of *Muppet Babies* carried over to *Little Muppet Monsters*, which is what makes its failure a little disappointing.

Imagination being able to take you anywhere was a theme incredibly close to Jim Henson's heart, and for many fans of *Muppet Babies* that sentiment is the most apparent in this beloved show. The gang could literally go anywhere from their nursery – and they did. *Muppet*

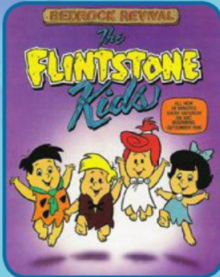
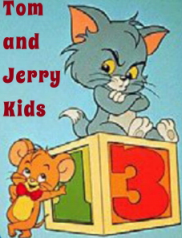
*Babies* was so popular that it can be considered directly instrumental to the success of copycat ideas like *A Pup Named Scooby Doo*, *The Flintstones Kids*, *Tom and Jerry Kids*, and of course, *Tiny Toon Adventures*. All of those shows featured the child-versions of familiar characters performing somewhat similar adventures as what the same characters will do as their future selves.

What sets *Muppet Babies* apart from other similar cartoons is that focus on imagination and wonder; the idea that as long as you believe, you and your friends can imagine anything and go anywhere. Hank Saroyan

summed up Henson's approach to the show while speaking with the *Prescott Courier* in 1990 about an opera-themed episode. Saroyan recalled of his friend Henson, who had passed away that year, "He wanted children to believe that anything is possible. That's the only thing that's going to save this planet – the power of imagination." So, for now – we can't get our hands on a collection of all the *Muppet Babies* episodes, but the love for and encouragement of imagination that Henson worked so hard to instill in children and adults alike glows a little stronger with our memories of this incredibly fun show.

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*Oh we do like to geek beside the seaside!*



A photograph of Brian Henson, a man with a beard and dark hair, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and dark trousers. He is smiling and holding a string attached to a puppet. The puppet is a Muppet character, possibly a member of the Animal Gang, wearing a red jacket and a red cap. The background is dark with some colorful, out-of-focus lights. In the top left corner, there is a small graphic of a starburst with the number 30 inside. The title 'PUPPET MASTER' is written in large, stylized, yellow-outlined letters across the middle of the image.

# PUPPET MASTER

As chairman of The Jim Henson Company, Brian Henson ensures his father's legacy while continuing to astound audiences with new technologies, fantastic characters, and the undeniable Henson gift for making the world smile. Starburst pays a visit to Hollywood's historic Charlie Chaplin Studios to talk with Henson about his wide-ranging career as a puppeteer and filmmaker, and the impact his company has had on modern entertainment over the last 60 years...

Brian Henson performing in  
Puppet Up! - Uncensored

by Neil McNally

**Starburst:** This month marks the release of *Muppets Most Wanted*; how gratifying is it for you to see your father's creations now handled by the Disney Company and firmly back in the public eye?

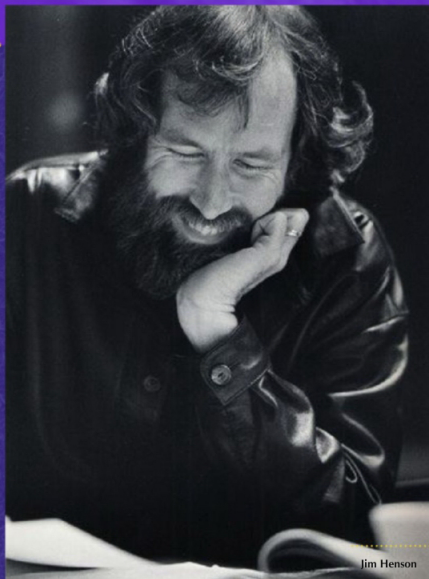
Brian Henson: The whole letting Disney take over the mantle of the Muppets was really a dream of my Dad's. He really wanted the Muppets to live in the theme parks. He thought that's where they can live forever, and it was what he was trying to do when he died. It was good to eventually get that to happen. The way they made the last Muppet movie [2011's *The Muppets*], the money that they spent on it, and the money they spent on promoting it, and the creativeness of the promotions was just so impressive. The movie itself was sort of a promise of more Muppets, so then [*Muppets Most Wanted*] becomes in some ways a lot more important because this one is the *real* Muppet movie! What I've seen of it, it looks really good. I think they've learned a lot more from the last film and it's impressive to see when Disney gets behind something. It's so much more impressive than what we could ever do as an independent company.

**What do you think your father would think about the enthusiastic reception the Muppets continue to have today?**

Truthfully, I think my father expected it. I think that he always knew when he was creating the Muppets that the Muppets would continue to stay alive as close as to forever as you can get. I think he always knew that, so I think he would be very pleased to see that that's happening. I think he would be very disappointed if the Muppets had sort of faded away.

**Growing up, what was he like as a father?**

Well, he was a great Dad. He was working a lot. He would sometimes work two or three days in a row, all day, all night, all day, all night... so, he wasn't around the house a lot. But, because of that, we spent a lot of time at the shops and at the studios hanging out with him. Kermit is a similar relative to Jim Henson, very similar in that my Dad was smart, he was the organizer, but he was very collaborative, this is him at work, and yet he always had a naughty sense of humour that was kind of just delightful to be around. As a Dad, he was much the same way. My Mom would always say, "Wow when Jim would come home for the weekend, I never had to worry about what the family was going to do." He would wake up in the morning and say "We've got to go find worms today, let's go!" He would just come up with fun things to do. He was also very aware of himself as a guide and teacher to us. He was a lovely Dad.



Jim Henson

Jim and Jane Henson with their children (L-R: Lisa, John, Heather (on shoulders), Brian, Cheryl.







Dark Crystal (1982)

As for yourself, did you always envision working in puppetry, or did that come later on? I was always very enthusiastic about puppetry as a kid. I didn't think that was where it was going... I was sort of very mechanically minded. I kind of thought I was going to go in a sort of sciency direction... But, I think it was when I did the second Muppet movie [*The Great Muppet Caper*]. I did the marionette sequence when Kermit and Piggy are riding in the park, and I think that's when I knew "Boy I really love this business!" I thought I was going to go into special effects. My early career was *Return to Oz*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Labyrinth*, *Santa Claus: The Movie*. Those sort of things that I did, they were sort of special effect puppets. But, I guess I was probably seventeen when I really decided I'm going to try to stay in this business.

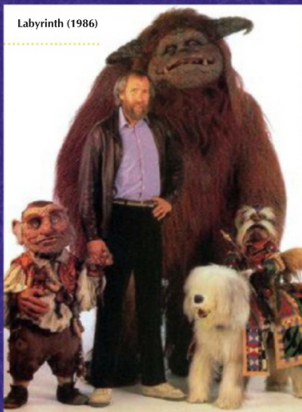
#### What did you take away from working on *Return to Oz* and *Little Shop of Horrors*?

Well, different things. *Return to Oz*, I think Walter Murch [director] had a very powerful impact on me watching him work. He's won multiple Academy Awards for picture editing, sound editing, and sound design. He's a master filmmaker; he was very good in knowing just precisely what he wanted, and I felt like I learned a lot from him. Those sorts of puppets are so complex that they take sort of four or five people to build and operate them. So, you end up working in these tight little teams within a broader team, and then I started bringing that team from movie to movie. It was almost like I was a little business unto myself! *Little Shop of Horrors*, [Designer] Lyle Conway's vision for the plant was really impressive and [Director] Frank Oz - I think there almost isn't a director as bold as he is in terms of adjusting a tone for the entire movie... There was a tone actually to the whole movie that was reflected in the acting style, the writing style, the music, the set design, the creature design, and that I found very impressive.

#### How did *Labyrinth* come about for you?

That was really when I came back together with my Dad. Now at that point I think I had worked on three movies in England; he said, "Do you want to work on my movie?" I was like, "Yeah sure, but you've got to hire me!" [Laughs]. That was real fun because I felt very much that I belonged there. He needed a coordinator for all the puppetry effects because there was so much going on, so to be able to work side by side with him and feel very much like I'm working with a colleague, and not so much with my Dad, and to really connect with him problem solving and creating in a movie... that was a lot of fun. With *The Dark Crystal* he went in a very different direction, almost in contrast to the Muppets. Then with *Labyrinth*, what he wanted to do was kind of bring it back a little

Labyrinth (1986)



Little Shop of Horrors (1986)



Return to Oz (1985)

Jim and Brian Henson, *The Storyteller* (1988)

bit, to stay visually in that sincere, dramatic place of *The Dark Crystal*. But, he wanted to bring the humor and the irreverence and the absurd aspects of the Muppets back into the movie. Watching him do that was a lot of fun, because my Dad really, really, really liked to laugh, and I think just staying in a dramatic realm could feel heavy for him.

#### What was it like to be directed by him?

He actually gives people quite a lot of tether. My Dad was much more of "Get all the admirals in the right places and see what happens!" So he was a real appreciator of what everybody could bring to it. When he was directing, he knew what he needed for his vision to hold together, and he definitely made sure nobody was going to upset the track of his vision. But, beyond that, he wanted to get the best that creative people around him could bring. He'd say, "If you've made a movie well, then you've made the movie that only those 300 people could have made, and only if they were all working their hardest."

#### Moving on to *The Storyteller*, can you talk about your memories of that?

Well, again on *The Storyteller* I was the puppet coordinator, so I was responsible for getting all the creatures on screen and working well. So, that's really what that whole period was for me, [it] was just this wonderfully ambitious project where we were just creating creatures every week, and they were so different and every episode was like a different movie. It felt so creative. It was like making nine movies in a year!

#### How was working with John Hurt?

It was actually a lot of fun. One thing that we did with that, which we didn't usually

do, and this was sort of the way I work and not so much the way my Dad worked... generally speaking if I could, I would hide the puppeteers completely so that the cameras and the director could just shoot however they wanted. So, with *The Storyteller's* Dog, I was always under the floor or behind the wall and you couldn't see me... so he didn't kind of know who I was for a chunk of time [laughs]. And then of course he did and then we did get very close. At the time, what I was trying to do was make the most ambitious hand puppet ever made. So there was like twenty-five motors in his head, and I had a computer control which was working through a scorpion board parallel processor. *The Storyteller's* Dog was the predecessor to

all the technology that then enabled us to do *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Dinosaurs*, and the digital puppetry that we do now.

#### Your feature film directorial debut was 1992's *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. What did you want to bring to the table with this movie that hadn't been tried before with your father's characters?

The big thing that I wanted to do, which some fans love that I did it and some not so much, was I wanted to take them into a different reality. I felt like we had done the three Muppet movies that are set in our world... so then we decided let's put the Muppets somewhere else. For me that was sort of liberating and something that I needed to do. To just try to keep these Muppets in their traditional relationships and their traditional dynamics without my Dad around and without Richard Hunt [puppeteer], it was hard. I felt very good about everything that we did. I really enjoyed letting the characters play other roles. I love the fact that you saw their real dynamics slipping into the movie all the time. So, the whole film, in every aspect, what we wanted was the contrast of Dickens and Jim Henson. We wanted that stark contrast to show everywhere - you see the cold harshness of Dickens, you see the whimsical touch of Jim Henson! Michael [Caine] got it straight away, which was great because he needed to play Dickens solely. He was great because he said, "I get it. I'm going to play Scrooge as if I'm working with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and this is a very serious drama." I said, "That's exactly right!"



Jim Henson over-seeing his company's creations on the set of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990)





Brian Henson with Rygel on the set of  
*Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars*

In 1999, *Farscape* premiered. As a filmmaker, what attracted you to this television project? I really wanted to do science fiction. My Dad was such a fan of science fiction. I was an avid science fiction reader when I was a kid, and the idea of trying to take to the television screen what we were doing in movies was really intriguing to me, so I wanted us to be enormously ambitious with it. Then once we got into it and I was spending time down in Australia, I loved the wildness of the Australian people. They are emotional, they are wild, they are expressive, and the idea started to develop that we could just really re-invent the tone of science fiction and do something that nobody else is doing. *Star Trek* was so successful at the time; [it] had a science fiction futuristic image that was very wise, very calm, and we just liked the idea of bringing a primitive energy back into science fiction, so that these races can actually be quite primal and that's when we brought in all the tattooing and piercings. We said that if *Star Trek* is taking a science fiction vision that takes normal emotional reactivity and turns it from ten down to six, we're going to take normal emotional reactivity and turn it up to 16!

In a similar darker vein, you made *'Battleground'* for the Stephen King based television series *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*. As no one speaks in the episode, how did this challenge you as a director?

We had to make it very, very fast because it was on a television budget. I had to shoot it in

ten days, so I had to prepare for months. When Bill Haber, who was the executive producer, said, "How do you feel about William Hurt? He's very intense." I said "No, Intense is great. I'm very intense too. But, you're hiring one of the top three voices in the world, and he's never going to say a word" [laughs]. That is a movie about detailed observations, which is fantastic because television often becomes a radio play with pretty pictures. There's lots of big close ups in *'Battleground'*, and just watching somebody do something in a very deliberate and thoughtful manner is riveting. It's really exciting. When William opened the box that had the toy soldiers in it, and it was just a wrapped delivery box that shows up at his door, we put the thousand foot mags in the cameras, which are the big mags that hold a lot of film... Just watching all of William's actions as he's cutting the paper, as he's considering, as he's chewing hazelnuts because that helps him to concentrate, it's all just a study in detail of what he's doing so that you know exactly what he's thinking. After doing that, I said "I don't ever want to work with dialogue again because this is much more interesting." I developed as a voyeur [laughs].

Can you tell our readers about your recently announced project for the Syfy channel? It's called *Jim Henson's Creature Shop Challenge*. It's the first big reality TV show we've done. The idea is it's what they call a highly skilled elimination competition. So, we

found creature artists from around the country. We had a great casting agency that did this exhaustive search. We brought artists in and then the winner wins a job at the "Creature Shop," a dream job for them. We just wrapped the first season. It went really well. I think it's such a rich show. It takes place in the "Creature Shop." They're building their creatures there, and every episode they have to do a film test with their creatures in our stage on camera. So, it's pretty great. I feel really good about that.

**How do you continue to push the Jim Henson Company into the future while still maintaining your father's creative spirit?**

Well, he was always re-inventing. I think it was hard for him to keep going with the Muppets towards the end because he was used to always doing something new. He stopped doing *The Muppet Show* after five years. It was the most popular show in the world, and he cancelled it. You know, we just look for ambitious and excellent things that have an element of the fantastic and fantasy, and just see where that brings us. What's cool about the company is we can do children's television, we can do prime-time television, we get to do movies, we get to do theater shows. There's sort of a philosophy to how we approach things, which is to be innovative, to do it different, to make it excellent... But, in that sense we can kind of go wherever we go. I never know what we're going to do next!



**JIM HENSON'S CREATURE SHOP CHALLENGE** premieres in the US March 25th on Syfy, (UK, TBC).

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IT'S

NOT

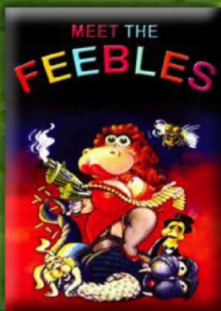
THE  
MUPPET  
SHOW

by Ed Fortune



Jim Henson is responsible for a lot of things; not only did he create a great many puppet properties, he also encouraged many others to do the same. But not everyone followed the example of THE MUPPETS and SESAME STREET however. Not all puppet shows are for kids...





Puppeteering has a long history of being satirical and aimed at grown ups, as anyone who has actually paid attention at a Punch and Judy show will tell you. So when this traditional form of storytelling meets up with the hyper cuteness of *The Muppets*, you can expect all sorts of fuzzy hell to break loose. *Meet The Feebles* is perhaps the best example of this. A darkly satirical take on *The Muppets*, the *Feebles* are a band of puppets skilled in the performing arts and have their own TV show, *The Fabulous Feebles Variety Hour*. The plot revolves around an emotionally unstable Hippo called Heidi (a pink diva prone to violent outbursts) and her damaged relationship with Bletch the Walrus (an emotionally unavailable semi-aquatic creature). Unlike *The Muppets*, who are madcap and zany, the *Feebles* are psychologically damaged and unstable. Because this is also a satire on the entertainment industry as whole, all the puppets are having affairs with each other. Of course when Heidi discovers that Bletch is having all sorts of sex with other people, she has a breakdown and goes on a rampage with a pair of machine guns. (Let's be honest, if Miss Piggy could have gotten a firearms license, this would have happened to Kermit by now!)

The movie was directed by none other than Peter 'Lord of the Rings' Jackson back when he was a scrappy indie moviemaker fighting for any work he could find. Fresh off the success of his extremely gory (and very silly) alien-invasion movie *Bad Taste*, this 1996 feature was originally intended to be a TV

series, but was altered to be a full-length flick thanks to a change of heart by the producers. The film was very low budget and suffered from a lot of funding issues. This led to plenty of improvisation on set, and this lends an anarchic feel to the entire thing. Like its source material, *Meet The Feebles* also has a musical number, though if you're expecting something sweet like 'Halfway Up the Stairs' you'll be disappointed. Instead, the showstopper is called 'Sodomy' and though it's catchy, we don't advise that you sing along to it in a public place.

For a better quality of tune (including a handful of songs you *can* sing on the train), seek out *Avenue Q*, which may want to imagine is just down the road from *Sesame Street*. This Tony Award winning Broadway show deals with what happens to a young and aspiring puppet once he's left college and wants to do something with his life. Like *Sesame Street*, the format is meant to teach its (adult) audience important life lessons. Given that some of the songs have names like 'Everyone's a Little Bit Racist' and 'You Can Be as Loud as the Hell You Want (When You're Makin' Love)' it should be obvious that it has its tongue rammed firmly into its cheek. *Avenue Q* was also originally conceived as a TV show, but the show's creators realised that a lot of the humour worked really well with the puppeteers present on the stage. (Also, they couldn't convince the likes of the Fox network to take the risk on a silly puppet show.)

The show features a mix of people and puppets – most unusually it also features

a fictionalised version of *Diff'rent Strokes* actor Gary Coleman. The character was included as an example of how life doesn't always work out according to plan, and the original production intended to cast Coleman in the role but he declined. One of the major themes of the show is that though western culture tells children how special they are, it often goes out of its way to tell adults the exact opposite, making Coleman (a once famous child actor who lost it all) a good example. The puppets themselves are thinly veiled parodies of *Sesame Street* characters. Rod and Nikki for example, bear more than a passing resemblance to Bert and Ernie, though as this is an adult show, one of them is gay. (And of course, has a crush on the other one.) Another character of note is Trekkie Monster. Originally intended to be obsessed with *Star Trek* in the same way that the Cookie Monster is with cookies, Paramount however refused the production the required permission, meaning only the name remains. Trekkie Monster is best known for his central song 'The Internet is for Porn', one of the smash hit tracks from a musical which is still touring to this day. The show's creators, Jeff Marx and Robert Lopez, have since gone on to even better things. Lopez's last project was writing the soundtrack for Disney's *Frozen*.

An adult-orientated puppet show that did make it to TV screens was *Greg The Bunny*. Like *The Muppets*, it was set in a world where puppets and people lived together. Because it has a darker, real world spin to it, the puppets



(or "Fabricated Americans" as they preferred to be called) were treated as second-class citizens. The show was about the life of a good natured but naive young rabbit called Greg who becomes the star of a popular kids TV show called *Sweet Knuckle Junction*. Starring alongside him are a colourful assortment of troubled puppet celebrities such as Warren DeMontague, a pompous, self-absorbed, substance abusing ape; Frederick "Count Blah" Blah, a vampire who claims that *Sesame Street*'s Count Von Count stole his schtick; and Tardy Turtle, a reptile with learning disabilities who eventually goes on to become a Harvard Professor.

The show suffered from the usual ups and downs, having originally aired on the Fox Network and then moving to the less well-known IFC network. This was due to the show having a very dark (and sometimes decidedly aggressive) sense of humour and Fox honestly having no idea what to do with a popular but potentially controversial show. During their move to IFC, a lot of the puppets were apparently lost or ruined, which lead to the various puppets being redesigned or simply discarded.

Greg ended in 2006, though it's still available on DVD and streaming. Show creator Dan Milano and (human) lead Seth Green are both now better known for *Robot Chicken*, which also takes things associated with childhood (mostly toys) and uses them for black comedy. Another member of the creative team, Steven Levitan, went on to create the award winning comedy, *Modern Family*.

Another bit of Muppet inspired fun worth a mention is *'Smile Time'*, a very special episode of the supernatural TV series, *Angel*. The plot revolves around the vampire Angel and his gang of investigators who suspect that the kid's puppet show *Smile Time* is stealing the life force from children watching on TV at home. The titular Angel gets cursed whilst poking around in the studio, and wakes up the following night as a puppet version of himself. Rather than switching careers and following in the footsteps of Count von Count and Count Blah and becoming a professional 'counter of things', this puppet vampire and his team soldier on instead. The influence of *The Muppets* can clearly be seen, from the character design of the cute and fuzzy version of Angel to the jolly songs that are sung to lure in the children.

Of course, it would be remiss of *The Jim Henson Company* not to notice that many people have taken inspiration from *The Muppets* and decided to take it an adult direction. Rather than issue legal notices and try and limit people's fun, the Muppet masters have instead responded by playing them at their own game. The Henson Alternative is the adult branch of *The Jim Henson Company* and is very much the place where they test their wilder ideas.

For example, a troupe of Henson trained puppeteers has been intermittently touring the International Comedy Festival scene with an alternative humour show called *Puppet Up Uncensored*, which includes

some startlingly sharp routines that rivals the likes of *Avenue Q*. The short-lived game show *Late Night Liars* pitched human contestants against a series of deceitful puppets and the web-exclusive *S.U.D.S. (Simian Undercover Detective Squad)* featured a pair of monkeys parodying every possible procedural cop show cliché you could imagine.

The company has also been working on a gritty (but humorous) film noir story called *The HappyTime Murders*. Set in a world where people and puppets work closely together, it focuses on puppet private eye Phil Phillips. Hot on the trail of a serial killer who murdered his brother, Phillips' investigation leads him to the cast of an '80s TV show called "The HappyTime Gang." Brian Henson himself has long been attached as director, but as the movie has been in development since 2008, we aren't holding our breath.

Of course the main reason there's been no movement on *The HappyTime Murders* is because Brian Henson is too busy bringing Muppet goodness back to the world and inspiring others to greater heights of felt-based wonder and silliness. This means that there will always be a new generation of people out there who wake up one morning and realise that puppets aren't just for kids. We're looking forward to seeing what the future holds, and quietly hoping that it will contain more hippos with machine guns!





## OUTSIDE THE BOX



All the news from  
the worlds of  
**Doctor Who** with  
Paul Mount



## NEW DOCTOR, NEW LOOK

It's a defining moment for every actor who takes over as the titular Time Lord in *Doctor Who*; the big costume reveal. Three weeks into filming for his first year in the series, the BBC last month finally issued the first official publicity image of new Doctor Peter Capaldi in costume.

Capaldi and costume designer Howard Burden have opted for a sleek, stylish look of half-length frock coat, plain dark trousers, waistcoat and well-polished DMs. The flashes of red velvet in the jacket's lining intriguingly and subtly evoke the look of third Doctor Jon Pertwee (1970-74). "Howard Burden has woven the future from the cloth of the past. Simple, stark, and back to basics," says Capaldi. "No frills, no scarf, no messing, just 100 per cent Rebel Time Lord."

Lead writer/executive producer Steven Moffat added: "New Doctor, new era, and of course new clothes. Monsters of the universe, the vacation is over - Capaldi is suited and booted and coming to get you!"

Bow ties, it seems, are no longer cool...

## AWARD-WINNING DOCTOR

Neatly drawing a line under the successful fiftieth anniversary celebrations for the series, *Doctor Who* triumphed at the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual National Television Awards ceremony, broadcast live from London's O2 Arena on 22<sup>nd</sup> January. *Doctor Who* won the gong for best TV Drama (the award being collected by Jenna Coleman and Steven Moffat) and later Matt Smith won the Best Drama Performance award, with Coleman again performing collecting duties. Smith himself was unable to attend in person due to his commitments on stage at the Almeida Theatre for *American Psycho* but in a video acceptance speech later posted online Smith thanked his fans for voting and commented that, "you made my time on *Who* the best and the most brilliant and the most audacious part of my career to date... I am forever grateful." Rumour has it that we've not necessarily heard the last of Matt Smith's Doctor...

*Doctor Who* has regularly won the Best Drama Award at the NTAs since the show's revival in 2005, scooping the honour from 2006 - 2010 before losing out in 2011 to BBC school drama *Waterloo Road* and in 2012 and 2013 to ITV's period hit *Downton Abbey*. Matt Smith previously won the Best Drama Performance (Male) category in 2012 (the 'male' and 'female' categories having been combined into one Best Drama Performance category for the first time this year).

More kudos for the *Doctor Who* franchise as Big Finish Productions scoop the award for Best Online or Non-Broadcast Audio Drama at the BBC Audio Drama Awards on 26<sup>th</sup> January. The four-part production of 'Dark Eyes', starring Paul McGann as the Doctor, was written by Nicholas Briggs who also provided the voices for the Daleks in the production (as he does in the TV series). The award was presented at a ceremony hosted by comedian Lenny Henry and BBC Director-General Tony Hall at the Radio Theatre at Broadcasting House in London. The award was collected on the night by Briggs and Big Finish alumni Jason Haigh-Ellery (executive producer) and David Richardson (producer) who said, "Someone asked me recently how I might one day look back at working on these *Doctor Whos* for Big Finish, and I said I'd remember it as the happiest time of my life. For us to win an award while having the privilege of doing such gloriously happy work is indeed an honour."

## IN MEMORIAM

To a generation of *Doctor Who* fans all it takes is intoning "Stevens..." in a really deep voice. Actor Jerome Willis, who played Global Chemicals director Stevens in classic 1973 Jon Pertwee adventure 'The Green Death' (aka 'the one with the maggots') passed away on 11th January at the age of 85. Willis, who briefly reprised the role of Stevens in spoof documentary 'Global Conspiracy' on the 2004 DVD release of 'The Green Death' also appeared in TV dramas such as *Freewheelers*, *The Caesars* and *Within these Walls* and under a layer of prosthetics in the short-lived 1994 Gerry Anderson sci-fi adventure *Space Precinct*, where he played captain Rexton Poldy.

Newport-born BBC costume designer Ken Trew also passed away on 11th January aged 77. Ken joined the BBC in 1964 and became an Assistant Designer in 1965 working on classic *Doctor Who* serials such as 'The Myth Makers' and 'The Invasion'. He revamped Jon Pertwee's colourful frills-and-velvets look in 1971 and later designed Sylvester McCoy's costume for the Seventh Doctor. He continued to work on the series until the original run ended in 1989 and he also contributed to other BBC Productions such as *Bergerac* and *The Onedin Line*.

## DARVILL DOWN UNDER

Actor Arthur Darvill, who played the long-suffering Rory Williams in *Doctor Who* from 2010 - 2012, is joining the exodus of series stars to Australia as reported in last issue's *Outside the Box*.

Darvill will be reunited with his co-stars Matt Smith (The Doctor) and Karen Gillan (Amy) for the breakneck 'Doctor is IN' mini-tour in Sydney, Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne between March 1st and 9th.

## MUSIC NEWS

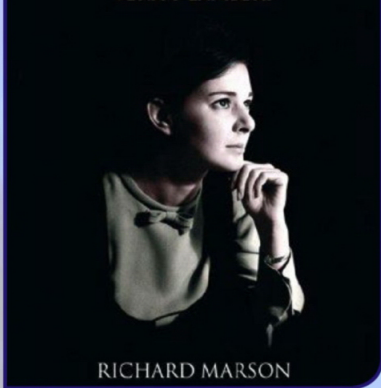
Silva Screen will issue the soundtrack to last November's anniversary 'origins of *Doctor Who*' BBC2 drama *An Adventure in Space and Time* on 3rd March. The music, composed by Edmund Butt (*Life on Mars*, *Ashes to Ashes*, *Murphy's Law*, *Mistresses*), conducted and orchestrated by Geoffrey Shaw and performed by the Chamber Orchestra of London will feature original music cues from the ninety-minute TV movie with titles including 'The Right Man', 'I've Got An Idea', 'The Daleks', 'What Dimension', 'Piss and Vinegar' (yesss!!) and 'Kill Dr Who' (oo-er). The CD release will include a commemorative booklet with a reversible cover.

## BOOK LIST - DOCTOR WHO IN PRINT

If you've spent the weeks since Christmas wondering how the Doctor passed his centuries of self-imposed exile on 'Trenzalore' as depicted in 'Time of the Doctor' then a new BBC e-book released on 27th February will finally bring an end to those sleepless nights. 'Tales of Trenzalore' is a collection of four novellas which chronicle the Doctor's battles on Trenzalore prior to his regeneration. It seems that not only was the Doctor bedeviled by inept Daleks, wooden Cybermen and comedy Sontarans; some of his older, less familiar foes had a go too. 'Let it Snow' by Justin Richards features a return appearance from the Ice Warriors (reintroduced into the TV series in last year's 'Cold War' episode), George Mann's 'An Apple A Day' features the Krynoid (from classic 1976 Tom Baker serial 'Seeds of Doom'), 'Strangers in the Outland' by Paul Finch sees a return for animated plastic mannequins the Autons and in 'The Dreaming' by Mark Morris The Mara, from the era of Fifth Doctor Peter Davison, pops up

## DRAMA AND DELIGHT

THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF  
VERITY LAMBERT



RICHARD MARSON

for another crack at the last of the Time Lords.

Meanwhile Miwk Publishing, who caused a minor furore last year with the publication of 'The Life and Scandalous Times of John Nathan-Turner', a candid expose of *Doctor Who*'s producer from 1980 to 1989, have announced that they're going right back to the beginning of the show with the publication of a biography of Verity Lambert, the show's very first producer. 'Drama and Delight' will be published in January 2015 and is being written by Richard Marson, author of the Nathan-Turner biography. The book will celebrate the life and groundbreaking career of Lambert who, at the time of her appointment to the post of producer of *Doctor Who* by the show's creator Sidney Newman, was the youngest and indeed only female producer at the Corporation. Verity went on to become head of drama at Thames Television, set

up her own production company - Cinema Verity - and, prior to her death in 2007, had firmly established herself as one of the great contemporary figureheads of British television. Miwk's Matt West told *Outside the Box* how the biography project came out: 'As we drove up to the FAB Café in Manchester in July 2013, Richard mentioned to me that he was thinking of writing a biography of Verity Lambert next. After a month of pestering I persuaded him to go for it and we're thrilled. He's already spoken to a number of people connected with the many shows Verity's produced over the years and there's still more interviews to come. Much like some of our other titles, it's a wonder that no-one's written on the subject before. Her life and legacy is in safe hands.'

*Outside the Box* is relieved to note that Miwk resisted the temptation to title the book 'Piss and Vinegar'.





# WATCHING DOCTOR WHO

an in-depth look  
at the World of  
**DOCTOR WHO** by  
JR Southall



When Russell T Davies returned *Doctor Who* to our television screens in 2005, the innovation he made that ensured its success was to bring the companion out of the Doctor's shadow and firmly into the limelight – and thus by doing so, place both companion and Doctor firmly at centre-stage. No longer were the regular cast people that the stories happened to, now they could be the people that the stories were *about*.

The effect of this change was subtle at first – and wasn't entirely without precedent in the series' original twentieth century run; the innovations adopted by Russell T Davies were only what might have been expected fifteen years on from the story of the Seventh Doctor and Ace. For every *Father's Day* – in

which there was no disguising that the story was more concerned with Rose Tyler and her relationship with both her father and the Doctor, than the effects of time going askew – there was something like *The Unquiet Dead*, in which the companion was largely incidental to the plot. *Aliens of London* perhaps struck the best balance, in which a deceptively traditional plot plays out simultaneously with the story of Rose's first return home. By and large, Davies maintained a similar balance across the next four years, telling stories about his companions but never allowing the companions to overshadow his stories, and while all this was happening, the story of the post-Time War "Lonely God" Doctor was developing in the background.

Davies' changes might have come as

a stark contrast to the *Doctor Who* of the 1960s, in which companions might be unceremoniously dumped out of the series in the middle of a story let alone at the end of a season, but all they really served to do was bring *Doctor Who* into line with modern television. For the past several decades, by way of an example, murder mysteries have been as much about the detectives as they have about the criminals, or the solving of the crime.

That Steven Moffat took Davies' approach and went so much further with it shouldn't have come as a surprise, given that Moffat was the author of such situation comedies as *Joking Apart* and *Coupling*, in which the situation was the characters rather than their occupations. Taking over *Doctor Who* in the build-up to the fiftieth anniversary gave

Moffat the perfect excuse to write a version of the series in which the Doctor himself was very much the centre of attention. Russell T Davies' "Bad Wolf" story arc might ultimately have become about Rose Tyler, but up until the final episode in which she scattered those words across time, it would have been difficult for a watching audience to predict that it was the companion who was responsible for their appearance in every story. Conversely, the Series Five story arc about the cracks in time always seemed as if it might be something to do with Amy Pond, and even when it was revealed that this wasn't the case, the revelation was only that it was actually something much more central to the series: the Doctor's own TARDIS was responsible. Since then, we've had series-spanning stories about the Doctor's assassination and his companion's journey through his past lives, not to mention the anniversary special in which the five years of Russell T Davies' post-Time War Doctor were retconned into a new story arc for the future. For once, the title character has been the *reason* for the series, rather than an excuse for it to tell stories with as much variation as it liked and no rhyme or reason to tie them together.

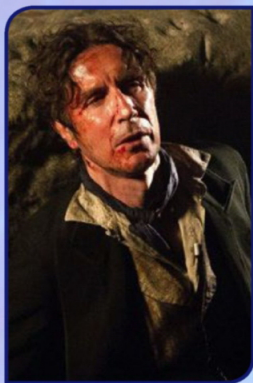
Now that Matt Smith has departed, we can look back and see how successful this experiment has been, and gauge whether or not it is perhaps time for *Doctor Who* to get back to basics.

The Eleventh Doctor's tenure wasn't quite the self-contained four-year-long story we might have thought it was. Although the cracks in time were a useful tool for Moffat to exploit in *The Time of the Doctor*, in reality they're just unstable wormhole interfaces and were no more developed as a *means* of allowing the Time Lords entry back into our universe than we might expect to find Gallifrey hidden in a painting, as and when that particular story finally resolves. And while Moffat might have chosen the Christmas

special as a vessel in which to spell out the finer points of the Silence's arc for those that missed it, in truth that story was told by the end of Series Six, and the dangling plot-threads from Series Five ("Silence Will Fall!"; the exploding TARDIS) were resolved with the appearance of the Silents the following year after all. Maybe by expecting too much we were always going to be sold short; or perhaps the conceit that the Silence were involved in the latter events of Series Five – but we just didn't *remember* them having been – was too much for anybody to follow.

Either way, Moffat's tenure to date has been more one of a developing storyline than of an arc densely plotted from the off. In many minds, Series Six was deemed the least successful and that's probably also the one that Moffat had planned out the most loosely in advance; it's surely only the success of River Song in *Silence in the Library* and *The Time of Angels* that led to her being both the Doctor's assassin and his bride, and it would have been interesting to see how the 2011 run of stories might have panned out had the character been less well-regarded on her initial appearances. Perhaps the Silence Will Fall conceit might have been more clearly explained on its debut, rather than having to be readdressed some thirty-odd months later.

What will be interesting now will be to discover just how much Steven Moffat changes the series in order to accommodate Peter Capaldi's Twelfth Doctor. Much as fans have enjoyed speculating about a "darker" incarnation (largely based upon Capaldi's more advanced age and classic series fanhood, as well as his role as Malcolm Tucker in *The Thick of It*), I suspect the Doctor himself might not be as far removed from Matt Smith's incarnation as we predict. Paul McGann's few minutes in *The Night of the Doctor* were as brilliant an example as any as to what a different actor can bring to ostensibly similar dialogue; Moffat didn't really write the



Eighth Doctor inherently any differently to his Eleventh, and yet in the performing of the lines the character changed. In *The Day of the Doctor*, three different actors dealt in three different ways with essentially very similarly written dialogue.

No, the indication that a change in emphasis might be coming has been signalled by the things Moffat has chosen to include in Capaldi's debut story (surely to be called *Twelfth Night*?); not only will the Paternoster Gang (aka "Menagerie a Trois") be back, but so apparently will the Clockwork Droids of *The Girl in the Fireplace* too. By assembling familiar elements for the new Doctor to face in his first story, not only is Moffat suggesting to the audience – as he did in *The Eleventh Hour* – that yes, this is indeed still the same old show, but he is also allowing Capaldi's debut to strike out in a new direction once that first hurdle has been overcome – just as Terrance Dicks made *Robot* a reassuringly traditional debut for Tom Baker, only for Robert Holmes to pull that rug out from under the audience in the following story *The Ark in Space*.

Peter Capaldi has already invoked the ghost of Tom Baker's Doctor with his boggleged first scene in *The Time of the Doctor*, and Steven Moffat is on record extolling the virtues of *The Ark in Space*. Might we just be on the verge of a new era in modern *Doctor Who*, one that harkens back to the salad days of the mid-1970s? And, in spite of the unresolved nature of the Gallifrey storyline, might *Doctor Who* be about to turn its gaze outwards once more? Most significantly, now that the Eleventh Doctor's wraparound story is told, might Steven Moffat be about to ditch the timey-wimey? It's an enticing possibility.

Artwork by Simon Brett







## DOCTOR WHO - THE MOONBASE (1967)

BD + DVD / Cert: PG / Director: Morris Barry / Screenplay: Kit Pedler / Starring: Patrick Troughton, Michael Craze, Anneke Wills, Frazer Hines / Release Date: Out Now

The 'classic series' *Doctor Who* DVD range edges ever closer to its end – barring any further missing episode recoveries – with this four-part 1967 serial from the early days of Patrick Troughton's TARDIS incumbency. The two episodes which remain in the BBC Archives (already released in 2004's *Lost in Time* box set) are joined here by two instalments (episodes one and three) animated in the style of the recent *Ice Warriors* release which also saw two of its missing episodes similarly recreated.

If you happened across the recent DVD of first Doctor William Hartnell's swan song serial *The Tenth Planet* you could be forgiven for thinking that, when scripting its 'sequel' just a few months later and bringing back the already-popular Cybermen, scriptwriter Pedlar just scribbled out a few names in the script and moved a few lines of dialogue around. *The Moonbase* is pretty much the same story as *The Tenth Planet*, differing only to the extent that it's not quite as good. *The Moonbase* sees the series drifting towards its infamous 'base-under-siege' era, when it seemed that virtually every story saw the Doctor and his companions arrive at some isolated enclave of human scientists or explorers which is immediately besieged by a hostile, usually scaly, alien threat. So it is in *The Moonbase*. The TARDIS

lands on the moon [You don't say - Ed] and, after a bit of horsing around in spacesuits on the lunar surface, the travellers find themselves inside an installation housing a machine called the Gravitrone, which is controlling the weather systems of the planet Earth. But something's wrong: Moonbase operatives are falling ill and before long the complex is attacked by the Cybermen – sleekly redesigned from their clumpy first appearance – who have designs on the Gravitrone, which they plan to use to wipe out life on Earth.

The Cybermen (all silver body-suits, piping and the now-familiar handlebars) are as eerie as they were in their debut, with their unearthly, modulated, slightly singsong voices. But not much else really impresses in this routine, occasionally sloppy four-parter, least of all the laughable paper plate Cyberships which drop onto the table top lunar surface. The commendably multinational Moonbase personnel are a pretty faceless bunch and their Commander, Hobson (Patrick Barr), is full of hot air and bluster but comes across more like a car mechanic than the boss of a high security lunar weather station, with his constant complaints about the Gravitrone being "up the spout" when its operation is interfered with. If the idea was to portray a futuristic working unit as

a bunch of ordinary people doing a mundane job, rather than the buttoned-up, space-suited boffins and technicians of traditional science fiction, then it's pretty much job done, but the Moonbase crowd are a slapdash collection whose scientific knowledge stretches no further than, incredibly, using a drinks tray to plug up a hole in the Moonbase's outer skin.

The TARDIS is pretty crowded by this point – Frazer Hines' Highland piper Jamie having been a last minute addition to the crew a couple of serials earlier – so there isn't a lot for most of them to do. Jamie is quickly knocked out, Polly (Wills) spends most of her time putting the kettle on but Ben (Craze) not only does the strong-arm stuff but he also displays hitherto unsuspected scientific know-how when he helps Polly synthesise a plastic-destroying mixture as a weapon against the Cybermen. Even Troughton's mercurial Doctor is more restrained here (courtesy of director Morris Barry who, as the disc's 'making of' documentary reveals, reigned in the actor's more outrageous tendencies), often hovering in the background looking anxious or, in one unusual scene in the animated third episode, heard animating with himself via an internal monologue.

Animators Planet 55 had the difficult job of establishing the tone and style of the series by visualising its missing first episode as well as its third and, by and large, they've done a decent job. There's the occasional over-long, dialogue-heavy static sequence but generally the animation is pacy, stream-lined and somehow entirely in keeping with the story's clinical setting. Episode three, in which a Cyberman clambers from a medical table, even replicates the wobble of the table from the live-action footage at the end of episode two! The likenesses of the regulars and the guest cast are hugely impressive but the animation really shows its worth in episode three as the Cybermen stream out of their spaceship, swarm across the lunar surface and fan out to prepare for their attack on the Moonbase. The final scenes of episode three are so well-realised it's easy to forget that they're animation at all.

*The Moonbase* is hardly a stone-cold classic and there's certainly nothing especially original or inventive in its storyline, but it's cheerful, occasionally competent and, with its first-class animated episodes, it's near-as-dammit complete again for the first time in over forty years. Not a bad way for the 'classic series' DVDs to (near enough) bow out.

**Extras:** *Lunar Landing 'making of' / Commentaries / Trailer / Photo gallery*

Paul Mount

**RATING** ★★★★★





## DOCTOR WHO - THE WEB OF FEAR (1968)

DVD / Cert: PG / Director: Douglas Camfield / Screenplay: Mervyn Haisman, Henry Lincoln / Starring: Patrick Troughton, Frazer Hines, Deborah Watling / Release Date: February 22nd

Brig... sorry, Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart and a handful of UNIT soldiers – sorry, they're just soldiers at this point – venture out into bright, sunny Covent Garden. They're on a rather foolhardy mission to recover the Doctor's Police Box and wheel it – on a trolley, no less – back to their secret bunker base. Suddenly the streets are full of Yeti (well, four of them at any rate, doubling up and filmed emerging from various warehouses and side streets) and a pitched battle ensues from which there can be only one survivor. It's iconic. It's soldiers bravely facing off against ridiculous monsters. It's the Yeti out of the London Underground and clubbing soldiers to death or spraying them with a suffocating web. It's *Doctor Who*, circa 1968. It's *The Web of Fear*, and, astonishingly, it's back in the BBC Archives and available on DVD after a forty year sabbatical and it's pretty much a thing of joy and revelation.

Despite its reputation as one of the great epics of the *Doctor Who* canon, *The Web of Fear* is actually a rather low-key story. The Earth is attacked by an alien intelligence, using

unlikely robots as foot-soldiers and yet it's all incredibly small-scale and intimate. It's a story told on just a handful of sets – impressive reconstructions of London Underground stations and tunnels and the cramped military enclave fighting to hold back the advancing tide of web and Yeti. Episode four's soldier/Yeti battle is the only location sequence and, indeed, pretty much the only proper action scene. Yet it's still a gripping, thrilling tale, classic 1960s *Who* 'base-under-siege' stuff powered by a typically magnetic performance from Patrick Troughton and boasting a die for cast of well drawn, four-square supporting characters. As well as one horribly servile and cowardly Welsh stereotype. Oh well, it was the 1960s...

*The Web of Fear* isn't especially clever or sophisticated but at this point in its history the show had hit on a winning formula and was happy to keep on reaping the rewards serial after serial. Watching the story now it's easy to see how it inspired current showrunner Steven Moffat to resurrect its central Big Bad – the amorphous

Great Intelligence – for the most recent series of *Doctor Who*. Thwarted by the Doctor in a previous adventure, the Great Intelligence has gone to great lengths to create a trap to bring him back to Earth, so it can drain his knowledge of Space and Time to use to its own advantage. It's a simple and yet unusually Doctor-centric plot and even Moffat's potentially irritating retooling of the show's continuity – 2012's Christmas special *The Snowmen* saw the Doctor give the Intelligence a map of the London Underground, thus providing the historical inspiration for the events of this earlier serial – doesn't take the edge off the innocent thrill of *The Web of Fear*.

Episode one – already held in the BBC Archives and familiar to most fans – has a wonderfully Hammer Horror vibe, as Jack Watling's returning Professor Travers tries to liberate an inactive Yeti robot from the hands of collector Julius Silverstein. Before long the Doctor, Jamie and Victoria are in the Underground, creeping around dead platforms even as, unbeknownst to them, the city is in lockdown and a fungal web

is creeping through the tunnel network and the streets are patrolled by lumbering, slightly farcical Yeti (gotta love the glistening zips up their backs).

Despite the restricted locations of the rest of the serial, there's never a dull moment as the Doctor is reunited with an old friend (Travers), meets a new one (Lethbridge-Stewart arrives in episode three, frustratingly still missing and represented here, as in its iTunes release last October, via stills and soundtrack recording) and there's a palpable sense of stifling claustrophobia in the subterranean settings and the encroaching threat of the deadly web. It's charming, vintage *Doctor Who*, directed with verve and energy by the late Douglas Camfield and with a script which never patronises and constantly surprises with its wit and maturity.

So its back – more or less – and even if it's not as big and bold and downright spectacular as fan legend might have suggested, *The Web of Fear* is still a warm and wonderful piece of archive television in its own right and a very special and very important piece of the *Doctor Who* legend. It's a must-have.

**Extras:** 'Enemy of the World' 'also available' trailer

Paul Mount

RATING ++++++ 9





# THE PATH OF THE SETTING SUN



The Story of  
The Mysterious  
Cities of Gold

by Stuart Mulrain

**T**he year is 1986, children's TV has been confined to the broom cupboard. Phillip Schofield - not yet the Silver Fox of Daytime TV™, but rather a chipper young presenter with a puppet gopher - introduces us to a new cartoon series that will instantly capture the imagination of millions of children across the country. Join Starburst, voice actor Howard Ryshpan and writer Jean Chalopin as we take a look at the epic journey that led us to *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* and beyond...

## BEGINNINGS

The path to *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* begins with the publication of Scott O'Dell's US novel *The King's Fifth* in 1966. The book tells the story of Esteban, a young map maker who finds himself on trial for murder. While awaiting trial, Esteban recounts his quest for gold, led by the greedy Captain Mendoza with the help of Zia, a young Inca girl who is their guide.

Around 18 years later, Jean Chalopin and Mitsuru Kaneko approached Japan's educational TV channel NHK with the idea of making a cartoon series that was loosely based on O'Dell's book. NHK had wanted to get into animated TV for a while and were searching for a project that would fit their educational remit. With the greenlight given, Chalopin wrote the series, taking little more from O'Dell's book than the character names. As well as making Esteban and Zia into young children, the character of Tao was also added, with the purpose of grounding some of the more science-fiction elements of the story into some kind of history.

These sci-fi aspects came more heavily into play with the introduction of the Olmecs during the final few episodes of the series. To further

fit the remit of the show having an educational agenda, a short documentary was added to the end of each episode to teach viewers about the history behind the key elements of the episodes.

Bernard Deyries was hired to direct the series, moving himself and his family to Japan to do so, and the series aired on NHK between 1982 & 1983 and was relatively successful, although it wasn't until the French and, particularly, English language versions that the series really captured the hearts of its audience.

## HOWARD RYSPAN'S MYSTERIOUS CITIES OF GOLD

"It really goes back some time before *The Mysterious Cities of Gold*," recalls actor Howard Ryshpan on how he came to be involved in the series. "I was asked by the recording studio, Multidub, to take over the series *Belle & Sebastian*. I gladly accepted and, after the series was over, I was asked to become the studio's resident English director."

*Mysterious Cities* had caught the attention of the BBC & Nickelodeon and both had become interested in a joint venture to produce an English language dub of the series, hiring Multidub to produce it. "The BBC



wanted the series to be voiced by Canadian actors since they felt Canadians would not have regional American accents which might be difficult for a young British audience to understand," Ryshan explains.

Ryshan worked with Kelly Ricard (who was also the female narrator on the series) on adapting the French scripts; "Kelly had also worked with me on a number of projects, not only as an actor but as a translator/adaptor. Since her French was a lot better than mine, Kelly would do a first English draft. After we would then sit down together and readapt the text for dubbing. The technology was pretty rudimentary in those days so it was a case of sixth sense, timing and a whole lot of experience that would make it work."

Ryshan then set about casting the series, making the choice to cast children to provide the voices of Esteban, Tao & Zia rather than adults, as was the standard at the time. "What a lot of people don't seem to realise is that children often give line readings that are different than what an adult would give and yet make the utmost sense out of the line," Ryshan says of his reasoning behind wanting child actors.

For the casting selection, Ryshan had four choices for each of the characters, which were then sent to France for the final selection. For the children, Shiraz Adam was chosen to play Esteban, with Janice Chalkelson chosen for Zia and Adrian Knight – who Ryshan had worked with on *Belle & Sebastian* and *Ulysses 31* – was chosen to play Tao.

"As I look back on the series, after all these years, I still recall the fact that it was really the cast that gave me the most pleasure," Ryshan fondly recalls of his time on the series. "I had worked with most of the actors before but somehow there was a real melding of people in this series. We worked hard and we all had fun being in the studio and working together. That also goes for the children, who came to work and, every once in a while, would fart on mic to try and crack up my great sound engineer Doug Parry."

When it came to the casting selections for Mendoza, Ryshan found himself with only three choices to send, so recorded an audition himself to make up the numbers. To his surprise, his was the audition chosen to play the part. "In playing Mendoza I tried



to go beyond being a cartoon character and I think I succeeded in trying to make Mendoza more human. I played him down and with less bravura. I tried to lift him off the paper and to have a little less makeup in my voice."

"What appealed to me was that Mendoza was a flawed character. He was never one dimensional. He was out for his own end and purpose and only afterwards did he change for the good. In so doing he became not only very human but became one of us, someone we could identify with and relate to. In the end I suppose someone who is perfect is intrinsically boring or certainly becomes so after a while. He also took on the mantle of being a hero. I don't think that any young person could not embrace that."

For the French and English language version of the series a new score composed by Shuki Levy, who had also provided the score for *Ulysses 31*, was chosen to replace the one used on the Japanese version. Levy's score is a thing of beauty, adding an extra dimension of both adventure and magic to the series, but for most the true crowning glory of the music is in

Levy's theme song for the series. Sang by Noam Kaniel, it's one of the catchiest and best remembered cartoon theme songs of all time.

The series aired in the UK on BBC One between 1986 and 1987 and was a huge hit with the audience, leading the BBC to repeat the series in 1989. Despite being shown again on one of the children's channels on Sky TV, the series all but disappeared for the best part of 20 years before Fabulous Films finally released the series on DVD in 2007.

## SERIES TWO & BEYOND

"Mitsuru Kaneko, Bernard Deyries and I always wanted to do a sequel," Jean Chalopin explains, "but the rights had been scattered all around the place, and it took us 12 years to get them back in our hands." In the end it took the best part of 30 years for a second series to arrive, but in 2013 Blue Spirit Animation finally gave fans the long awaited follow up.

The series picks up where the first series left off and sees the children head to China in search of the next lost city, which largely fits in with Chalopin and Deyries' original plan for the series. Chalopin explains, "The overall story that we had devised since almost day one is what has been followed: we know where to go, and why. In that sense it fits. But I am not writing this





**"The children, every once in a while, would fart on mic to try and crack up my great sound engineer Doug Parry."**

**— Howard Ryshpan [Voice Actor]**

time, and none of the original artistic team is involved. There is another team and different sensibilities, so there is a different tone. Bernard and I are doing our best to help the team keep and respect the essentials."

As with the French version, none of the English language cast was approached to be a part of the second series, much to the disappointment of the fans. "I would certainly have loved to direct the series again and to have reprised Mendoza," confesses Ryshpan. "Although many years have passed, my voice has hardly changed. Interestingly enough I could have reassembled most of the cast too; although we would, of course, have had to find the young children to play Esteban, Tao and Zia."

"I watched an Episode in French with my children," Ryshpan says of the second series. "Personally, I thought the children were quite well done and I thought that the actor who played Mendoza was excellent. I think they have captured the feel of the old series both with the

characters and with the sense of adventure, while at the same time giving it a fresh look."

As well as a third series currently in production – which, according to Chalopin, will see our heroes head to India and Egypt – there are still rumblings about a possible movie. These rumours first surfaced in 2007 with the announcement of a film, but have since seemingly been forgotten, although Chalopin says there are two films currently being considered. "The first is an animation, which would be a prequel," he explains, "and the other a two-parter in live-action which is an international movie reshaping the first series."

## THE LEGACY

There are many elements that have kept *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* alive in the minds of the adults who watched the series all those years ago, and in the new generation that has discovered it. Part of it can be put down to the fact that the series all but disappeared for 25 years before finally coming back into our lives on DVD, proof if ever it was needed, that absence truly does make the heart grow fonder.

A huge part is in the genesis of the idea and the story and series that Jean Chalopin, Mitsuru Kaneko and Bernard Deyries created. For some it's Shuki Levy and Noam Kaniel's theme song. Chalopin puts the success of the French and English version down to the warmth that came across in the translation that was absent in the Japanese version.

Whatever the reason, there is no denying that there was a magic to the series that stuck with people, engaging its audience in a way that no other cartoon series did at the time or has

since. It's the same magic that has enthralled a new generation who have either discovered the series off of the back of the new series or had their parents introduce them to it.

"I always thought: could I bring this home and show it to my own children? Would they like it? Would they even look at it? Would it stand the proverbial test of time? Fabulous Films sent me a copy of the series which I gave to my children from my second marriage and said this is a series I made years ago, would you like to see it? 'Oh sure, dad.' And I thought... it's going to bomb. They put the first episode on and they never stopped until they went through every episode!"

For fans of the English language version though, it is fair to say that a large part of the magic came from the work that Howard Ryshpan and his team did on the series, so it is only fitting that the final thoughts on the series come from him.

"*Cities of Gold* gave the young audiences three well drawn major young people that they could imagine themselves being or even playing. And what extraordinary adventures they all had. What extraordinary lands they went to. It was this excitement of adventure that drew the young audiences and kept them following each episode. I know that I certainly was drawn to it even though I, being much older, had already succumbed to some high adventures myself in some far flung lands. And in the end, if it had not been for the material itself we would not be talking about it at all."

**THE MYSTERIOUS CITIES OF GOLD: SEASON 2** can be found on DVD/Blu-ray from February 17th, courtesy of Fabulous Films.



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**HORROR**

Obscura

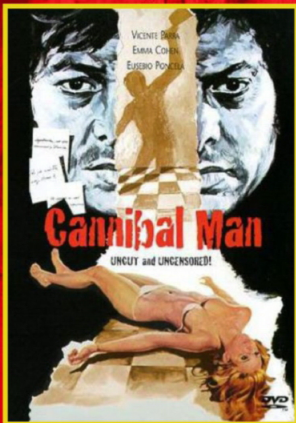
This month the man-eating Martin Unsworth unearths a once banned, often forgotten Spanish classic...

# THE CANNIBAL MAN

TERROR SUSPENSE · COLOUR  
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 **Indervision**  
MOVIES ON VIDEO





Despite being a former UK video nasty, *The Cannibal Man* (*La semana del asesino*, which literally translates as *The Week of the Killer* 1971) is one of the few that appeared on the infamous DPP list that are actually worth re-visiting. It was directed by Eloy de la Iglesia, whose impact on Spanish cinema is equally often overlooked. He became notorious as a very outspoken socialist, gay, filmmaker, whose movies broke the boundaries of the normally repressed cinema forced upon Spain under the oppressive dictatorship of Francisco Franco's government. While his early films were unashamedly promoted in the exploitation market, de la Iglesia does not shy away from addressing controversial social issues, pushing the boundaries of the strict Spanish regime.

*The Cannibal Man* tells the story of Marcus (Vicente Parra) whose descent into insanity owes more to his social position and cultural repression than any clichéd reasons of parental abuse or neglect. In fact, it is the state's neglect which is largely at fault. Marcus, uneducated to the point of ignorance, has to share his simple home with his truck-driving brother. This abode is in the middle of what is seemingly wasteland, where children and grown men alike hang around playing football and generally being a nuisance, and stray dogs prowl, looking for food. All around are the new, affluent residents of the high-rise apartments; the inhabitants often fleeing the city during the sweltering summer months. Most consider these residents above the rest of the populace; socially as well as literally.

Néstor (Eusebio Poncela) looks out over the desolate landscape with his binoculars; a view which includes Marcus' humble dwelling. Marcus works in a local slaughterhouse and it is here where the film opens, instantly filling the screen with graphic and disturbing images of cattle being hung and bled en masse while, clearly desensitised, Marcus casually stands eating a sandwich. The company, Flory, produces a range of top-selling soups and stews, not that this gives Marcus any pride. His girlfriend, Paula (Emma Cohen) is kept a secret, as her family would not approve of him. The fact she's younger than him being one bone of contention. The disapproving looks the canoodling pair receive infer the age difference is noticeable. Grabbing a taxi on their way home, they start passionately kissing, much to the driver's annoyance; *"I don't run a bordello"*. The driver kicks them out, but Marcus refuses to pay the fare: *"Shove your taxi!"* He tries to push the driver, but receives a swift knee to the balls in response. However, when the driver hits Paula, Marcus picks up a rock and strikes him. Worried that Marcus may have killed him, he assures her, *"You can only kill a person as easy as that in the movies"*. Unconvinced, Paula goes home to worry some more. As he is walking back he bumps into Néstor, who is out walking his dog. They strike up a conversation, with Néstor asking why Marcus always looks so indifferent about him; he had hoped they would become good friends. Néstor speaks in a soft voice (certainly in the dubbed version), he's obviously a sensitive, caring person as he shows his concern for Marcus.

The following day, Marcus reads that the taxi driver had died. Despite knowing that he acted in both self-defense and to protect Paula, he is clearly unsettled by the news. Paula is equally upset and convinced they will be found out. Back in his apartment, the couple makes love, set, metronome-style, to the sound of a ticking clock. Marcus' sexual technique is astonishing – he provokes ecstatic responses from Paula while barely moving. Afterwards, Paula insists they go to the police; *"To tell them what? What happened in there?"* he quips. Besides, they wouldn't believe them anyway; he is, after all, just a menial worker – *"The police will listen to the rich only"*. His reluctance to face up to his actions leads Paula to question whether she should marry him after all. *"I can't believe anyone who won't face reality. A marriage can't be built on lies"*; *"So, I can go to the police or go to hell, is that it?"* Paula assumes she's convinced him and the couple kiss. Only for Marcus to strangle her while locking lips, the ticking clock stopping dead at the point Paula gasps her last breath.

Impassive, Marcus carries the body into his bedroom. The taxi driver's death could be explained away as an accident, but this is a little harder to excuse. It's clear that Marcus is becoming more and more depressed and detached from reality. The nature of his work has desensitised him to everything, including the carnage he is wreaking.

Steve, Marcus' truck-driving brother and roommate, returns home from work a day early, but Marcus doesn't panic about what he's



done. With no beer in the fridge, the brothers go to Rosa's, the local social club/bar. Steve can sense something is wrong. "It's my girlfriend" he deadpans. Marcus confesses and Steve suggests going to the police. Flustered, Marcus unsuccessfully attempts to talk him into helping dispose of the body, so he takes a wrench and whacks at Steve's head. Blood splatters across the room, dripping down the screen, obscuring the audience's view. Placing Steve's lifeless body side by side with Paula, Marcus sinks into his chair and the seriousness of his actions occurs to him for the first time.

Steve's fiancée, Carmen (Lola Herrera) is waiting on the doorstep when Marcus arrives home from work, perturbed that he hasn't been in touch when he was due home. She insists on waiting, but seems more keen on receiving her expected present: a wristwatch. So keen that she goes into his bedroom to look for it while Marcus has gone to get her a glass of water and some aspirin. It's a fatal mistake, as she finds both Steve and Paula laid out on the bed. She will soon join them, as Marcus slits her throat in a moment that's tense, gruesome and terrifying in equal measure. As Marcus is outside, getting some fresh air in the stifling heat, Néstor comes over for another chat. He had seen Carmen earlier and teases Marcus about her. He is clearly pushing buttons for a reaction, which Marcus is too polite to rise to. Going for a walk, Néstor's demeanour flits between flirting and anxious, as he probes Marcus on his feelings. He takes an interest in his apartment, asking to see inside. "You wouldn't like it; it's full of memories, which wouldn't interest you".

Néstor takes him off-guard: "You should bury them". As a look of panic comes over Marcus' face, he adds "Get rid of the memories".

Marcus awakes on the sofa to the sound of Carmen's father knocking aggressively on his door. Concerned that Steve is corrupting his daughter, he insists on knowing where they are. Marcus allows him into the room, where he joins the body count courtesy of a meat cleaver to the face. By now the room is beginning to smell, and flies are becoming a problem with the heat, so Marcus decides to chop the remains into smaller pieces and dispose of them in the best place he can think of: the meat processing plant. He uses perfume to mask the putrid smell in his holdall and apartment, which is attracting the strays as well as flies, but it isn't enough to put off café waitress Rosa (Vicky Lagos), who invites herself around. Naturally, this doesn't end well, and soon there is no one else in Marcus' life to kill... except maybe his ever-so-friendly neighbour, Néstor. The climax takes place in Néstor's 'luxury' high-rise apartment, where he shows Marcus the wonderful view – right into his home. It's a tense, yet surprisingly tender scene in which the viewer (and Néstor himself) never quite knows whether Marcus will complete the killing spree, although it might actually be what Néstor wants.

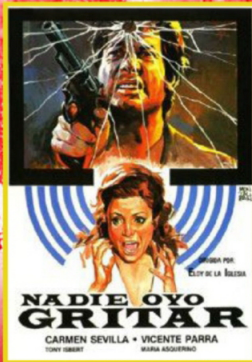
In keeping with the rest of the film, the climax is very low-key. This is a movie more about social standing, loneliness and being an outsider as it is about a psycho killer. In fact, the more the film progresses, the more

the viewer feels empathy for Marcus. He is a victim, who seals his fate the moment he strikes back at the aggressive taxi driver. Society has already judged him, so his actions have really no meaning but to delay the inevitable. Powerfully, de la Iglesia manages to portray Marcus' mounting mental illness with realistic aplomb. Without the need of the ostentatious visuals of Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965), it shows a man who, by the end of the film, is so distanced from reality that life has neither meaning nor emotion. On the opposite end of the scale, Néstor suffers similarly, trapped by (we assume) his sexuality, and lack of friends.

The sound of the clock aside, the soundtrack is relatively sparse. Some pulsating music throbs away in the background at times, and a bizarre triangle-like 'ding' accompanies the murders, as if a tally were being kept on a celestial abacus. Elsewhere, industrial sounds overpower some scenes, be it in the meat processing factory or overhead aircraft. These elements add to the oppressive feeling of the film; it manages to disturb without going over the top with horrific visuals. Although the film suffers from the usual synch-dubbing, the voice actors manage to convey the perfect emotions – or lack of them – to give the film a very natural feel. Marcus is more akin to the eponymous anti-hero in *Henry – Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986) than Michael Myers or Jason Voorhees.

The film's original title makes much more sense than the Anglicised version. While there is the assumption that, due to Marcus disposing of





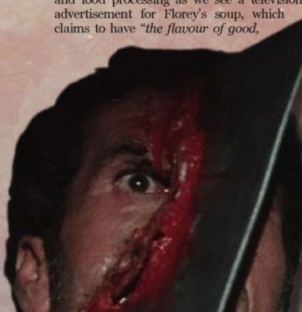
the bodies in the meat processor, the public would be eating human flesh, there are no scenes of cannibalism. When given a bowl of Florey's soup at the local bar, he instantly loses his appetite. Perhaps the cannibalism is a metaphor for the way the state eats up the squalid poor to feed the hungry rich? Either way, there is plenty of food for thought in de la Iglesia's screenplay, which is co-written by Antonio Fos, whose other work includes *The Vampires' Night Orgy* (1974) and the obscure drama *El transexual* (1977), which teamed Vicente Parra with Paul Naschy). Eusebio Poncela has had a long and varied career in Spanish cinema, recently appearing in the Lovecraft homage *La herencia Valdemar* (2010), with his character playing a larger role in its sequel *La sombra prohibida*. There's even an early swipe at consumerism and food processing as we see a television advertisement for Florey's soup, which claims to have "the flavour of good,

rich meat", although the eye-rolling child tucking into a bowl of atrocious looking broth does nothing to promote the idea.

Once banned, it had a brief re-issue in the UK, albeit only on VHS (from Redemption, way back in 1993) and cut by 3 seconds (Carmen's throat-cutting). While still shocking, it's doubtful this would cause many problems if re-submitted today. The American DVD from Blue Underground is uncut, featuring an amazingly explicit cover: a gory close-up of the meat cleaver embedded in the face of Carmen's father. Surprisingly, the film never received a contemporary American release, despite the fact one could imagine it playing in seedy cinemas during the 42nd Street heyday.

It wasn't de la Iglesia's first attempt at a horror story. In 1971 he made *The Glass Ceiling* (*El techo de cristal*), a brilliant but rarely seen film in which a day-dreaming young woman (Carmen Sevilla), who lives alone with her cat in an apartment building, becomes convinced the woman in the top flat (Patty Shepard) has killed her husband. The director's standard themes of voyeurism, paranoia and obsession all combine to deliver a glorious slow-burn of tension and fear. With confident, nightmarish editing, de la Iglesia draws the viewer into a scenario which keeps one guessing right to the end. It's criminal that the film is unavailable outside of VHS copies which circulate among fans, as it's an undiscovered classic. Similarly overlooked and unreleased on DVD outside

of Spain is his last horror thriller, *No One Heard the Scream* (*Nadie oyó gritar*, 1973). It is a master class of pacing, editing and suspense, with the director managing to mix several genre strands perfectly. Here, Sevilla returns as a woman who comes across her neighbour (played by *The Cannibal Man's* Parra) attempting to dispose of his wife's body. Instead of murdering her too, he makes her an accomplice, forcing her to help him cover up and then dump the body in a lake near her summer retreat. In a role a million miles away from his portrayal of Marcus, Parra here plays a forceful, decisive and manipulative murderer. The film has a deliciously twisted climax which is worth waiting for. Also worth looking out for (and readily available in the UK) is *Murder in a Blue World* (*Una gota de sangre para morir amando*, 1973) a futuristic thriller often likened to *A Clockwork Orange* (it was even released on video as *Clockwork Terror* at one point), largely due to its sub-plot of rehabilitating roaming gangs of thugs. The movie is even referenced directly at one point during a television broadcast. The whole film is very self-aware, from satirical commercials to having star Sue Lyon reading a copy of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (adapted by Stanley Kubrick) into the film in which she made her name). She plays a nurse who is killing young men, but the plot is largely irrelevant as it's the visuals and aesthetics that make the film worth watching. Hopefully one day his genre work will get the 'special edition' treatment they deserve, and open them up to an appreciative audience.



"Have a drink, mate? Have a fight, mate? Have a taste of dust and sweat, mate?  
There's nothing else out here."

# WAKE IN FRIGHT

A film by  
**TED KOTCHEFF**

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Caroline Preece

# The Girl From PLANET



There was a time not too long ago when witches were the most unpopular fantasy creatures around, especially on television. US networks tried and failed to get witches to catch on with shows like *Eastwick* and *The Secret Circle* and, here in the UK as recently as 2012, ITV2 tried its own take with the dire *Suitich*. Nothing worked and, against the odds, the creatures that became popular with the mainstream after vampires turned out to be zombies – the least outwardly ‘sexy’ of the mythological beasts. Werewolves were, and arguably still are, waiting in the wings, but it seemed for a moment as though witches had had their day.

Inexplicably, however, witches may be getting a premature regeneration with successful series like *American Horror Story: Coven* and *Witches of East End*, and news of a potential *Charmed* reboot on CBS next season recently got the internet into a bit of a tizzy. The fact that CBS want to remake a previously successful property for a new audience isn’t a surprise at all, and they are a network currently dipping their toe into genre television with *Under the Dome* and *Intelligence*, but the biggest question is why now? The show, based around three

(then four) sisters who discover they are demon-fighting witches, only ended its original run in 2006, after all.

It kicks up the same argument as *Spider-Man* and the subsequent *Amazing Spider-Man* did a couple of years ago, and that argument is no less valid here and now. Speaking as a fan of *Charmed*, as someone who grew up on their magical adventures, I had already slotted Lifetime’s recent *Witches of East End* into that magic-shaped hole in my heart. Which begs the question: why recreate something that has already been homaged and drawn upon by new and more relevant series? The level-headed among us will mention the terrible idea for a *Buffy* remake that came up a few years ago and thankfully never happened, but right now there’s a definite possibility of a *Charmed* 2.0.

Other people reading this will be giggling over the fact that *Charmed* actually had any fans, and it’s true that the intervening years seem to have mellowed out a lot of the online crowd who complained about its existence loudly and frequently during the show’s run. It was never a show designed to appeal to everyone, but the people it did connect with were – as with all series that don’t get a lot of love from the

masses – fiercely protective of it. You could argue that it wasn’t the best written, acted, directed or designed series ever made, but there’s a reason it ran for eight full seasons. Would a remake dilute that ardent fan-love, or might it just introduce the sisters to a whole new audience?

Because of its creative challenges and general unwillingness to cower to the will of its critics, *Charmed* was essentially always a fan-powered show that existed purely because of its viewers. Critics weren’t flying the flag as they have done for other unloved series, like *Community* or *Chuck*, that’s for sure, and this simple fact could be the biggest reason why a remake wouldn’t work. By their very nature, reimaginings are rejected by existing fans, and it takes a very special series or movie to silence those people – mess it up and they’ll definitely let you know. So without this core group of viewers on your side, presumably the people that have convinced CBS to give it another shot, the reasons for a remake’s existence start to diminish.

Past output from CBS does not instill confidence and, as mentioned, they’re not exactly known for their creative and daring sci-fi and fantasy shows. More often than not, their stabs at creating original genre series result in a weird amalgamation of police procedural and unimaginative sci-fi, a la this year’s *Intelligence*, and that approach would undoubtedly suck all of the life out of *Charmed*’s concept. As said by the creators themselves – it was a show about sisters who happened to be witches, not witches who happened to be sisters. It was a soap opera with magic and witchcraft as a backdrop (much like *Buffy*’s vampire and demons were metaphors for high school and young adulthood), not the other way around.

But, all of this said, there are definitely improvements that could be made. The common school of thought is that *Charmed* was good up until its fifth season, and then that’s where things went off the rails a little bit. Instead of exploring the bond between the sisters and the ways in which their identities as witches messed with their ability to live normal lives, we had weekly ridiculous costumes, *Sex and the City*-style voiceover episodes and a Hogwarts-



THIS MONTH

## THE CHARMED REBOOT:

## GOOD OR BAD NEWS FOR FANS?

style Magic School that removed the show even further from reality than it already was. Even the most dedicated of fans had trouble with seasons 5-8, and that's quite a sizeable chunk of the overall show not to like very much.

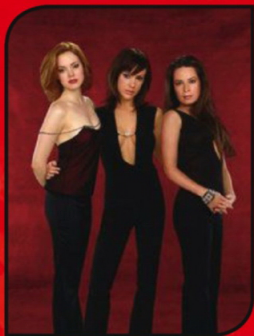
With this in mind, someone taking another stab at the show might not be the worst thing in the world and, now that witches are having a television renaissance of sorts, there couldn't be a better time to get creative with something like this. What most fans wanted to see after *Charmed* ended was a Wyatt and Chris spin-off that took the world and applied it to a boys-only action adventure series, not unlike what *Supernatural* started out as. It would be darker and more 'adult', alas, it's safe to assume that the shelf life on that has already expired. That said, the show made a point of expanding the Halliwell family right at the end and, though the comics have touched upon this post-show period a little, there's still plenty of room to explore.

But we all know that television bigwigs don't usually operate that way and, if there's any excuse at all to wipe the slate clean and start over, that's almost always what happens. Will we be watching another three actresses portray Prue, Piper and Phoebe?

Maybe we could have three entirely different sisters or, better yet, the various Halliwell children we saw growing up in the Manor in the closing montage of the original series. With it being so fresh in people's minds, it seems pretty silly to just rehash old ideas. Even if those old ideas are executed in a more compelling and consistent way, a straight remake rarely (if ever) retains the charm of the original material it's based on.

Remake culture in Hollywood has been a topic of discussion for a couple of decades now and, despite the fact that it's been going on for as long as anyone can remember, every significant announcement brings its own arguments for why it's a good or a bad thing. For *Charmed*, I feel like the answer lies somewhere in the middle. It was never a perfect show but it was a show that people really and truly loved right through until the bitter end. Now, new life has been breathed into the franchise via significant viewing numbers on Netflix, and this is the reason most often cited for CBS' interest in remaking it for new audiences to enjoy.

Why they can't just re-watch the old stuff I don't know, but maybe '90s fashion is a little hard to take for the new generation of telly fans. Even the cast have kicked up a bit of a stink, with Alyssa Milano in particular



criticising the decision to reboot the show rather than just make a sequel movie. She's right to a certain extent – a television movie would allow fans to revisit the world they fell in love with and wouldn't be as much of a risk, either financially or in terms of alienating the existing fanbase. It could also bring about the long-awaited reunion between all four sisters, as long as old issues can be ironed out (and Rose McGowan can be convinced) and a credible return for Prue concocted in the writer's room.

The truth is that we don't really know what shape this new *Charmed* will take, but the recent success of witches on television suggests that whatever it is, we're likely to be seeing the results in no time at all. Is this another shameless attempt at reusing old ideas to make money, or does someone at CBS feel like there are more stories to tell? For me, this is the first time something I've grown up with has been threatened with a credible remake attempt (as previously mentioned, the *Buffy* one doesn't count) and, although I would rather it didn't happen at all, I'm mildly intrigued by what might arrive on our screens next season. Will it be a straight remake, a sequel, a spin-off or just a brand extension? I guess we'll soon see.

+





# SINS OF THE FATHER

WORDS: ANDREW POLLARD



**H**aving appeared in the likes of *American Psycho*, *Mysterious Skin*, *Precious* and *Boardwalk Empire*, Bill Sage takes his first real plunge into the horror genre with Jim Mickle's *We Are What We Are*. Playing Frank Parker, Sage heads up a family steeped in tradition and with a sinister penchant for human flesh. Not just your usual cannibalism flick, the movie takes a contemplative look at societal issues and something deeper-rooted within the American culture. The actor took a break from his latest movie, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, to chat to Starburst about the dark, sinister, stylish *We Are What We Are* and to indulge in an impromptu Michael Parks love-in...

**Starburst:** What drew you to *We Are What We Are* and what piqued your interest?

**Bill Sage:** Well, the script. It was horror and I hadn't really worked in that genre before. I just remember telling my wife, you're not going to believe this script and oh, by the way, they eat people [laughs]. It was not what I expected; it was so much more, kind of, American allegory, religious allegory. There was an election going on at the time, the whole conversation of religion comes up every time anyone wants political office so I felt like this is a smart film that addressed the fundamental fervour and

takes it to an extreme; a real, literal extreme. I feel like [the US] gets really caught up in these things. I'm a spiritual person and in America we have I dunno how it is in the UK... I feel like, in this country, we've lost the meaning of symbolism. I love going to church, but my wife and I go to a church that's in the village, in Greenwich Village, and I've been to church in London, too, and that I enjoyed. I think also, when I had that meeting with Jim [Mickle], there was something about him. I could have a sense of his intellect and I could tell that he's a pretty great guy. I thought what he did with

*Stake Land* was very interesting, and *Mulberry Street*.

**For those going in cold on *We Are What We Are*, how would you describe it?**

I guess I would say it's a horror story of American atrocities. And Frank [Parker - Sage's character] has to pay the piper for the sins of all his fathers, of generations of family.

**The way it's shot, the way it's edited, and the tones and colours, it's perfect for the story and it's a beautiful film to look at.**

Oh yeah, that's Ryan [Samuel]. His cinematography's just amazing.

All the camera department, all those guys, are phenomenal.

With the film being a loose remake of the 2010 Mexican movie of the same name, were you familiar with the original at all?

I heard great things about it. I hadn't seen it and I waited until we were done. It's so different and [ours] really is a reimagining, especially because it's American. It's so specifically American. And I think that Nick was able to riff off of that and do something uniquely American. I like that director a lot, Jorge [Grau]. I thought he did a great job with that.

Both are good films that stand on their own, and there are certain elements that are very different in each...

And I really appreciated it. I appreciated how on board they were; Jorge and the producers from the original.

So they had a consultancy-type gig with your version?

Yeah, they did. We share one of the producers and Jorge saw it out at Cannes. They're completely supportive of each movie. They're both great, but they're quite different.

With your character of Frank Parker, he's very grizzled, subtle, intimidating, unnerving, much like the movie itself. How was he to play?

I did a fair amount of research on him, specifically about his deterioration. You can find a lot of material online, you can even find stuff in the library like the late '50s footage from New Guinea, you see actual behaviour and you see people in hospital, and it's then that the protein... it wreaks havoc on your nervous system. And people die a slow painful death, and that's what's happening to Frank. He is in the process of dying and part of him knows this, but the more

pain he's in, the more struggle he's in, the more he sees it as a fight and an affirmation of what he already believes. He knows that. At one point he says something to Iris [one of Frank's daughters]. It's the maker telling us it's time, and, y'know, we see that fervour, that belief, we see it in our culture. It's on the peripheral but it has its own problems.

One actor that you have quite a bit of interaction with throughout is Michael Parks. How was it working with him?

Oh, the best! He might be the best actor I've ever worked with. When we sat down to the dinner scene, just watching him walk through the door, I was so happy I'd done my homework because I knew that he... he's just phenomenal. He's so grounded, so tuned-in. I've worked with some good people but he's the best. I think Jim loved shooting that - it was a creative love affair. He loved, loved shooting that with him.

To us, that scene is one of the highlights of the movie, where things start to come to a head.

Yeah, that's the climax before the climax. I think we both felt pretty fully alive. I remember going home after and thinking I think that's a high point... at least in my film work. When you get to work with somebody as good as he is - you've heard other actors say it and it's

just so true - but it really raises your game. It's so much easier to tap into what you're doing.

There's nothing that we can think of seeing Michael Parks in where he's been anything less than excellent.

He's the real deal. I think he's one of those people from day one who couldn't be bad. I've looked at things that I've done years ago and I cringe! I look back at *Wild Seed* or even the old *Then Came Bronson* episodes that he did, which were very personal to me because when I was a little kid my dad used to let me stay up and watch... it was a treat to stay up and watch *Bronson* with him. It only played for a couple of years but it stuck in my mind. My dad was in the navy so he brought me back one of those watchmen cap hats, and I used to ride my bike and pretend to be Bronson, then years later I'm working with this guy! It's incredible! Really special. And then to find out it's not just the nostalgia of that, but this guy is just the best... it sort of illustrates something. I mean certainly he's been celebrated and he's respected, but I don't think he ever quite got the dues that he deserves. He's clearly never been in it for any celebrity purpose, and that's the same for me, so we connected on that. I think he deserves a little bit more attention than he got 'cos he's far better than other people I've



"MICHAEL PARKS IS A CANTANKEROUS FUCK BUT HE'S FUNNY AS HELL!"



worked with that have received more accolades.

Something you touched on earlier, this was your first real role in a horror film. How did you find that? You know, I did shoot a film that was nominated for a BAFTA in 2010 called *Off Season*. It was a case of a friend of mine who said he had a student that has written a great script and he wants you to do it. Because I respect this friend, I took a look at it... and it was great. It went on to get nominated for a BAFTA and it's quite good. Jonathan van Tulleken is the kid's name. He will be making some great films. I think he shoots a series in the UK [*Misfits*]. So *Off Season* was my first exposure to horror. I'm not interested in doing the bloody slasher stuff, although *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is one of my favourite films. *The Shining* probably is my favourite film. So I do appreciate the genre, and I especially appreciate the genre because it's something that you can get done, you can get somewhat of a budget for it, and it's truly independent. Like I was nominated for a Chainsaw, and I was completely honoured because I was looking at the Independent Spirit Awards and it's the same list of people that are nominated for Oscars! I mean, if you're gonna have an awards show for independent film, it might as well be independent. I think the horror

community maintains a certain kind of individualism, a certain independence, and that I love. So I'm definitely open to doing more.

Have you been approached for any more horrors on the back of *We Are What We Are*?

No, there were a couple of things but they were too... it has to have a core story that's worth telling. It can't just be gratuitous, and I felt that these things were a little gratuitous.

The genre can sometimes get a bit formulaic and hollow.

Yeah! I mean, it's fun, [but] for myself, as an actor, I'm way more useful if something's grounded like *We Are What We Are*. First it's gotta be a grounded story, and you have to earn that scene at the end, you gotta earn that shovel to the back of the head! Something's gotta be at stake. A great example of where it works is the Tom Hanks film, *Captain Phillips*. Note how they took the time to introduce the ship, the crew, the people and the village so that when something happens, when something's at stake, whether somebody likes the film or not at least they earn the right to have that kind of action. It's the same thing with nudity, you've gotta earn it.

What's next for yourself?

I've been working non-stop, I'm on a film called *The Sphere* and *The Labyrinth* right now; I enjoyed

**"YOU HAVE TO EARN THAT SCENE AT THE END, YOU GOTTA EARN THAT SHOVEL TO THE BACK OF THE HEAD!"**

working with Johnny Lee Miller and Lucy Liu on *Elementary*, and I've got another Hal Hartley thing coming up. He called me just before I left for LA, and I'm gonna do a part. Then I'm gonna track down Michael Parks and try and do something with him [laughs]. I had something lined up that didn't work out but I'll keep looking.

It's great to hear that it's not just the fans that are singing Parks' praises, with a certain generation first coming across him in *From Dusk Till Dawn* and then in his roles in Tarantino and Rodriguez movies, not to mention an absolutely brilliant performance in Kevin Smith's *Red State*.

Awesome! I'm so glad that we're talking about Michael and it's not just the young kids, who are amazing. Julia Garner, I've played her father twice... and loved working with both these girls [Garner and Ambyr Childers]; they are amazing and we'll see a lot of great work from them. Kelly McGillis! She was great. But Michael... He's also gotta be one of the funniest people I've ever come across. We got pretty close doing this, and he's just... I mean, he's a cantankerous fuck but he's funny as hell. Wonderful, dirty joke teller. When he gets pissed off, people get the hell out of the way. He can be scary, but I didn't see that. He was a pleasure.

He seems like a good guy to sit down with for a few hours with a bottle of whiskey and just shoot the breeze.

That's what we did [laughs]. The guy's worked with everybody!

**WE ARE WHAT WE ARE** gets a limited theatrical run on February 28th, before hitting DVD/Blu-ray March 3rd.



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# WINTER IS COMING

BY ANDREW POLLARD



Starburst  
infiltrates top  
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intel on the highly  
anticipated sequel,

**CAPTAIN AMERICA**  
THE WINTER SOLDIER



With the release of 2011's *Captain America: The First Avenger* came a shock for many moviegoers: a surprisingly good film. The jingoistic Captain America character was one that many thought would struggle to transition to the big screen and be able to draw in an audience. Marvel Studios and Disney swiftly stuck two fingers up to those naysayers. We were given a charming movie that gave audiences a Captain America that they could get behind, rather than a near-perfect specimen that it's hard to find sympathy for. With the artist formerly known as Johnny Storm, Chris Evans, leading the charge, Captain America would go on to take his rightful place in Joss Whedon's *Avengers Assemble*. Given the success of all of the Marvel Studios productions to date, a sequel was inevitable.

So here we are, 2014, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is almost upon us. With Joe and Anthony Russo directing, this Cap sequel takes Steve Rogers' story to a place that many didn't expect to see. Seeing as Captain America debuted way back in the 1940s, there's a whole host of villains and story arcs that could be incorporated into the second Cap solo outing.

Many presumed that Baron Zemo could be a route to explore or that transforming Arnim Zola into a major villain would be a logical progression from his supporting role in *The First Avenger*. But no, Marvel and Disney decided to go right for the jugular and give us a "villain" that only debuted in early 2005. Step forward, the Winter Soldier.

In the comic book world, the death of Bucky Barnes is something that haunts Captain America for decades. Much like Jason Todd's death was to Batman, the loss of Bucky's life is something that Cap is constantly tortured by. However, as is ever the case in the world of comics, death is by no means final, and Bucky would reappear in Cap's life as the Winter Soldier; a Soviet assassin with a deadly composure and clinical efficiency. No doubt about it, the Winter Soldier is a bona fide badass and arguably the most interesting and complex character in Captain America's gallery of friends and foes.

With Sebastian Stan's Bucky Barnes last seen blown off the side of a cliff, presumed dead, he will return, complete with a bionic arm and an expert aim. The comic book Bucky is

found by some Russians, frozen in ice, similar to Steve Rogers, but with an arm missing and with complete amnesia. The Soviets defrost him, equip him with the aforementioned artificial arm, turn him into a master assassin and deploy him on various murderous missions throughout the decades, freezing him in-between gigs (hence having only aged a few years since World War II). *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* will pull certain elements from the comic book source, but just how much remains to be seen. One must ask, though, with the Winter Soldier going on to become a "good guy" at stages in the comic books, even taking over the Captain America mantle after Steve Rogers is killed, will we see a potential swerve towards the end of *The Winter Soldier* and are there any other villains lurking in the background, ready to take their moment in the sun.

Not content with just introducing us to the Winter Soldier in the Russo brothers' sequel, audiences will also meet several other faces from the history of Captain America. First up, on the side of the Sentinel of Liberty, we have Sam Wilson, aka the Falcon. Debuting in 1969, the Falcon became the first African-





## JOERUSSO [CO-DIRECTOR]:

### On the differences between *The First Avenger* and *The Winter Soldier*...

The first film's kind of a wonderful love letter to the origin of Cap and to that time period, [this] movie is very different in tone, it's a political thriller. In order to be germane to that tone, we wanted it to be as modern and as edgy and as aggressive as it could be.

### On the movie's action...

You can't have thrills in a thriller unless the characters have real stakes and real jeopardy. Cap gets put through a lot in this film - it's action-heavy; very intense.

### On Anthony Mackie's *The Falcon*...

He's a character that's very close to us. As kids growing up, one of the first books we ever bought was a Cap/Falcon book, so we have a real affiliation for the character. Cap is looking for a friend in the modern world and Falcon could be that guy.



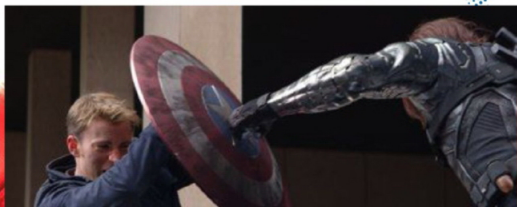
American superhero to be featured in a comic book. In that format, the character had an empathic link with his pet falcon, Redwing. It appears that this side of the cinematic Falcon will be left at the door, instead having Sam Wilson, played by Anthony Mackie, be an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. who is an expert military tactician and exceptional in close combat. One traditional element of the character that will make it to the big screen is the character's ability to fly. Using high-grade military equipment, Mackie's Falcon has his own set of wings, allowing him to soar the skies like his namesake. In a world filled with deceit and corruption, it appears that the Falcon is one of only a handful of characters that Cap can trust and rely on in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*.

With Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow having appeared in *Iron Man 2* and *Avengers Assemble*, the superspy will see herself teaming up with Chris Evans' Steve Rogers once more. Whether the Black Widow is a character strong enough to hold up her own movie, that's the raging debate in this world of cinematic supermen being given the chance to dominate the box office. So, for now at least, the character is again given a supporting role in a male-led blockbuster. This time around, though, Widow will be given a lot more screen-time than her *Iron Man 2* outing, and she will be an integral part of *The Winter Soldier*'s plot, much like the Falcon, being one of the few characters that Captain America can trust. Still, given the character's often shady dealings in the comic book world, it's not completely implausible for the Widow to go rogue. That said, she is already confirmed to be back for *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, so make of that what you will.

Another new face to the Marvel Cinematic Universe is that of Robert Redford. The

legendary actor/producer/director is playing Alexander Pierce, one of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s higher-ups. Shrouded in mystery, it appears that some of Pierce's orders and wishes may not sit all that well with Steve Rogers, which ties into one of the film's bigger plot points of Cap being unhappy with the way that S.H.I.E.L.D. often conducts itself. Similarly, another S.H.I.E.L.D. member that Cap is set to have issues with is Brock Rumlow, played by Frank Grillo. Whilst in the comics Rumlow is the villainous Crossbones, a long-time ally of the Red Skull who claimed to be the man who finally assassinated Captain America, *The Winter Soldier* has Rumlow working within S.H.I.E.L.D. It's been revealed that Rumlow will become Crossbones in the movie, suggesting he may be some sort of dirty operative here. With Cap suspecting S.H.I.E.L.D. of certain shenanigans, it seems like a logical train of thought to presume that this is where Captain America and Crossbones will finally come face-to-face after their initial working relationship as S.H.I.E.L.D. ops.

On the villain front, there will also be a small role for Batroc the Leaper. Played by MMA legend Georges St-Pierre, the part that Batroc plays in the movie is relatively unknown, although it's expected that he will be a throwaway villain that is used as fodder to showcase Cap in action, much like the Scarecrow in *The Dark Knight*. A French martial arts expert, the character of Georges Batroc seems like a perfect fit for French Canadian UFC icon St-Pierre. Another villain confirmed to appear is Arnim Zola. Having been introduced in *The First Avenger* working with the Red Skull, the evil genius is back. Again played by Toby Jones, this is another character that we're not quite sure on how he's going to be used this time out. Known for transferring his intelligence to robotic beings in the comic book world - robotic beings that





## SCARLETT JOHANSSON [BLACK WIDOW]:

**On Natasha Romanoff's  
relationship with Steve Rogers...**

When we find these two characters, we're both agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. We're fighting on the ground. It's not like we have these superpowers and fly around. We have a shorthand between us; we fight in a similar style. It's very much a working relationship. They find themselves in a situation where their working relationship becomes a more intimate friendship. They have some unexpected similarities between them. They have their guard up, they have their issues, and they've worked for "the man" for their entire career. Through this unexpected friendship that forms, they're starting to question what they want and starting to question their own identity.







we may have seen the blueprints for in *The First Avenger* – it'll be interesting to see what part Zola will play in *The Winter Soldier*. Logic points to him likely appearing in some form of flashback sequence from the time when Cap was frozen in ice.

Speaking of the past, some other familiar names that will appear are Dominic Cooper's Howard Stark and Hayley Atwell's Peggy Carter. Stark Sr. will be shown in flashback form, although Agent Carter's return is likely to involve her in flashbacks and in the present day. In fact, Hayley Atwell has already been photographed on set 'granned-up', suggesting that the modern-day Steve Rogers may well take a trip to visit his former sweetheart. We guess Cap's got a thing for the older woman.

Sticking with Peggy Carter, that brings us nicely to the modern-day S.H.I.E.L.D. and to one Agent 13, aka Sharon Carter. Played by Emily VanCamp, Agent 13 is the niece of Peggy Carter and also a regular love-interest of Steve Rogers. Yep, Cap is keeping it in the family. Assisting Agent 13 in the modern-day S.H.I.E.L.D. we will also see the return of Max Hernandez's Agent Jasper Sitwell and Cobie Smulders Agent Maria Hill, both last seen in Marvel's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Then, of course, there is Samuel L. Jackson's Nick Fury. Whilst *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is obviously a Captain America movie, S.H.I.E.L.D. is set to play a huge role in it. And where there's S.H.I.E.L.D. there has to be Fury. Again, it appears that Fury will be at odds with Cap at times throughout *The Winter Soldier*, but some of the most recent footage from the movie depicts Fury as being in a bad way. Wounded in an attack from the Winter Soldier, Fury is more vulnerable than audiences have ever seen him before. The glue of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Nick Fury fans should get to see a side of the character than we have yet to see; a weakened, humbled side to the usually cock-sure, precision-heavy leader.



## ANTHONY MACKIE [THE FALCON]:

**On landing the role of S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Sam Wilson...**

From the beginning, growing up my brother was a huge comic book person and he always showed the comic books with Black Panther and The Falcon. And when I heard about The Falcon and I was given the opportunity to meet with the Russos and we talked about it and what they wanted to do with the character, the reason it works so well is that the two of them have the ability to give dignity and substance to a character without making them heavy and hokey.

With all of the main players accounted for, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* finds our hero struggling to fit into a world in which he feels out of place. From the good ol' days to the days of Twitter, iPads, *Big Brother*, peach-flavoured water, blue WKDs, *Celebrity Big Brother* and deep-fried Mars bars, what's a Super-Soldier to do? Pretty much everybody that he once knew is dead, the familiar places that he remembers are not what they once were, questions and allegations hover over the heads of the US government and agencies such as S.H.I.E.L.D., and the ever-homely barbershop quartets have been replaced by the likes of Justin Bieber, Jason Derulo (and his trumpets), Little Mix, and Mumford and Sons. You can't help but feel bad for the guy – well, apart from the fact that he's super buff, super strong, super quick, super smart and carries a super badass shield at all times.

Of course, the main point of interest in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* for so many is the titular villain: the Winter Soldier. One of the coolest of all comic book characters, Winter Soldier has a brilliantly badass look, is brutal and clinical in his actions, and thinks nothing of killing off several hundred people in one sitting. And he's got a Fonzie-level cool metal arm! When Captain America realises that his long-presumed-dead best friend is now alive and a cold-blooded, mindless killing machine for the Russians, he's ripped apart. Setting out to stop the Winter Soldier and fight the good fight, Cap becomes conflicted at the realisation that this relentless wrecking ball of carnage is his former best friend. Add to that Steve Rogers' concerns that some of those involved in S.H.I.E.L.D. may not be what they claim to be, and it's safe to say that *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is shaping up to be one of the most interesting movies of 2014. Then, when all is seemingly said and done, it's now been confirmed that the events of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* will lead directly into *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, with it heavily-rumoured that the movie's post-credits scene will feature Aaron Taylor-Johnson's Quicksilver and Elizabeth Olsen's Scarlet Witch; two characters that we weren't expecting to see until *Age of Ultron*.

Marvel Studios must be credited for constantly delivering excellent movies since 2008, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* stands a very good chance of topping all that has come before it, even Joss Whedon's *Avengers Assemble*. Action, mystery, suspense, resurrection, twists, turns and a whole host of familiar Marvel characters have got us eagerly anticipating the Captain's next move.



**CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER** marches into UK cinemas March 26th.



## CHRIS EVANS [CAPTAIN AMERICA]:

**On the difficulties making Captain America work in live-action...**

His nature is to put himself last, his nature is to take everyone else's conflict and put it on his back, and as a result, it makes it hard to find an interesting film because most complex characters have flaws and Cap's a boy scout. I think what's good about this movie, the first *Captain America* was giving him the opportunity to serve, the opportunity to be a soldier. Then in *The Avengers* we have so many characters and relationships so you can't dive too deeply into one character. In this movie it's about showing Cap now given the opportunity to serve, given the ability to give of himself, the question now becomes "what's right?" He's so determined to be good, to do what's right. The conflict with modern society is "what is right?" In the '40s it was very easy to say "Nazis are bad." Today it's a little bit harder. Who am I serving? And with modern technology, and this is pretty relevant today for all of us, where is the line? What are we willing to compromise in terms of civil liberties to ensure security? And I think that's where it gets blurry for Cap, knowing what's the right thing to do. That makes an interesting conflict for him. It's not about doing the right thing, it's what is the right thing? I think we actually get to explore Cap struggling a little bit because it's not black and white, it's grey.

**On the film's pairing of Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff...**

She's somebody that's always had the ability to compromise her morals, and Cap is black and white. I can't say too much... but something happens. Something happens and as a result these two people from different worlds need to rely on one another. As a result you have two people who, on the surface might seem very different find a lot of common ground and learn a lot from one another.



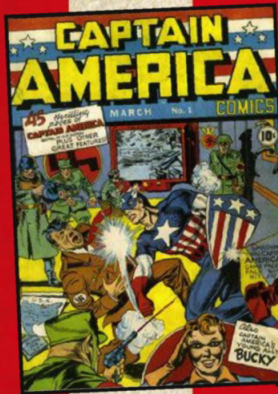


## PART 1: 1941 - 1974

BY ANDREW POLLARD

*With the star spangled Super-Soldier soon returning to screens, Starburst chronicles Captain America's 73-year tour of duty in comic books...*

**C**aptain America: an icon for so many. In a world which loves superheroes, Cap is the epitome of a hero - relentless, strong, selfless and with a ginormous sense of honour. Yep, they don't come much more clean-cut than Steve Rogers. Much like the character in the books found himself having to acclimatise to the modern-day world that he awoke in, Captain America is a comic book cornerstone that has had to adapt to the constantly changing wants and needs of the fan. In a world these days where the whiter-than-white image isn't necessarily the popular choice amongst readers, here we take a look back at the comic book history of Captain America as Marvel looked to keep the character's persona relevant and appealing in a world far removed from when the character first made his bow back in the 1940s.



## MAN MADE SUPER

From the minds of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, March 1941's Captain America Comics #1 gave the world the debut of Captain America. Printed then through Timely Comics, the predecessor to Marvel Comics, these early stories would put Cap on the path to becoming an American icon.

At a time when the world was under the cloud of war and dismay, Captain America was created as a sign of hope and endurance for those fighting the good fight, particularly if those happen to be of a red, white and blue persuasion. Captain America was not always simply Captain America, though. Beginning life as scrawny Steve Rogers, it was through an experimental serum that he would turn into the larger-than-life, muscular, super-fast, super-strong soldier that would become known as Captain America.

According to writer Joe Simon, the initial name planned for the character affectionately known as Cap was to be Super American. To us here at Starburst, Super American sounds like somebody that John Fashanu and Ulrika Jonsson would introduce on ITV's Gladiators back in the day. Luckily, Simon thought better of it, deciding that there were already too many 'Supers' around. The name Captain America was settled on, largely down to there being next-to-no captains in comic books. As with any hero worth his salt, Cap was given a sidekick, Bucky Barnes. Simon decided on this name purely down to a school friend called Bucky Pierson. And like that, two of the main characters in the Captain America world were created.

With Simon having concocted the idea,

personality and propaganda storylines of Cap and Bucky, Timely Comics wanted a Captain America book as soon as possible. Whereas comic books of the day would usually feature several short stories and several different characters with different writers and artists, Simon felt that having to draw a whole book for just one character would prove too much for his long-time partner, the legendary Jack Kirby. Initially seeking to use two young artists, Al Avison and Al Gabriele, to ease the Cap workload, Simon was eventually persuaded by Kirby to let him take a crack at Cap's first issue. Delivering as only Jack Kirby could, the artwork was flawless and met the required deadline despite essentially working solo on the book. Al Liderman would take inking duties on that first issue, and Howard Ferguson, a regular collaborator with the Simon/Kirby team, would handle the lettering work.

In a time of fun comics, be them superheroes or not, Captain America was specifically created as a political tool. With Nazi Germany having caused so much global distress by that point, it was no coincidence that Captain America Comics #1's cover depicted Cap landing a haymaker on one Adolf Hitler. Dated March 1941, the issue was actually released on December 20th, 1940, with World War II a year old at that point, and would sell just shy of one million issues. So, in the Starburst guide of how to create a successful comic book franchise, having your hero slapping Hitler silly on the first issue's cover is high up on the list.

Firmly marching to the beat of the American drum, Cap was an instant icon,

although he would still require certain tweaks to his imagery. For example, initially having a triangular shield, by Captain America Comics #2 he was given a circular shield which would go on to become synonymous with the character, and would also prove to be spectacularly effective when it came to slapping more bad guys upside the head. Along with chirpy, chipper sidekick James Buchanan Barnes Junior, or simply Bucky Barnes, Cap fought anybody that was opposing the US and her allies. Most regularly, Cap and Bucky would end up throwing down with the Japanese and Nazi Germans, as the events of World War II were being replicated in the comic book world.

With his trusty circular shield in hand, it was Captain America Comics #3 that gave readers the first glimpse of the shield being used as an almost-boomerang-like weapon, returning to Cap's gloved-hand after taking out some wrong-uns. What's particularly interesting about this issue, with a story titled Captain America Fells the Traitor's Revenge, is that a certain Stanley Lieber helped on it. At that time in print he was known as Stanley Lieber, but you can call him Stan 'The Man' Lee. And as quickly as that, the main traits of Captain America were in place, becoming Timely Comics' most popular character – he'd even got his own fan-club dubbed the Sentinels of Liberty – we had a hero with strong morals, stern beliefs, super strength, super speed, increased intellect, expert fighting skills and the propensity to make Hitler his bitch. Throw in a shield and a sidekick, and a legend of the comic book world had been born.





## FRIENDS, ENEMIES AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

Yes, Bucky Barnes was Cap's trusty sidekick, but our hero's rogues' gallery and allegiances began to expand. Whereas Superman has Lex Luthor, Batman has The Joker and Spider-Man has the Green Goblin, Captain America's main "big bad" is Johann Schmidt, aka the Red Skull. Debuting in Captain America Comics #1, Schmidt was hand-picked by Adolf Hitler to become the Head of Nazi Terrorist Activities. Having just such a job title on one's CV was always likely to lead to a few issues with America's favourite son. Whilst the Red Skull was initially defeated by Cap and Bucky, Hitler's protégé returned for Round 2 in Captain America Comics #7, and was again sent packing. It's likely worth noting at this point that those of a Nazi leaning were often referred to in the comic book world as being members of the Axis group.

As well as the Red Skull, some of Cap's earlier stories saw him go toe-to-toe with the Ringmaster in Captain America Comics #5, decipher the Black Talon in Captain America Comics #9, fought zombies in All-Winners Comics #1 and, in a sign of things to come, set up his own team of sorts in Young Allies #1. By the time 1942 rolled around, Cap had fought Medusa in USA Comics #6, Dr. Crime and his band of pygmies in Captain America Comics #12, and had yet another tear-up with that pesky Red Skull fella. Again taking a political angle, Captain America Comics #33 saw Cap journey to China in order to protect the country from the Japanese threat, complete

with very non-PC artwork, and he even tackled Frankenstein in USA Comics #13.

Whilst the Red Skull would go on to become Cap's greatest villain, our hero would still make the most of any opportunity to go up against the Red Skull's superior, as in Hitler. 1945's Captain America Comics #49 saw Cap and his pals in trouble with the League of Hate, a ramshackle bunch of Nazis that were doing the dirty work of Adolf. Of course, Cap would get the better of Hitler's lapdogs, before going on to land another punch to their boss's jaw. It's also worth noting that, during this period, the 1944 Captain America serial was the first time that any Marvel Comics (then still Timely Comics) character had transcended to another medium. Indeed, of Cap was quite the popular cat back in the day.

## WAR IS OVER

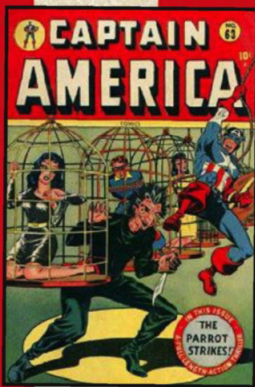
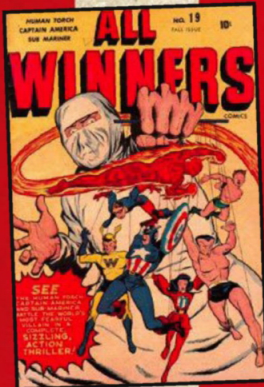
When World War II came to a close, what would be next for Captain America? A propaganda tool of huge proportions, a sign of hope for so many suffering from the devastating events of the war, where does this symbolic character go when the war is over? Well, like so many soldiers of the time that survived the war effort, Cap was given an honourable discharge from the army. Being the good guy that he is, Captain America Comics #56 found our hero helping out with the relief effort in war-torn countries. After the dust settled, Steve Rogers initially moved on to the teaching profession. We like to think that many a pupil got a circular shield to the temple when not paying attention to Mr. Rogers.

As we all know, you can't keep a good hero

down, and it was just a case of making Steve Rogers interesting and relevant in a time when the war was finally done. Not to knock teachers around the globe, but would you really want to read a comic book of the adventures of Mr. Rogers? Let's see, he could run out of chalk for his blackboard in one issue or have to fight the evil forces of school dinners in another. That said, if it was the modern day, we're sure Steve would be having to stop students from sending each other inappropriate Facebook messages on their iPhones. Damn pesky kids of today.

Anyway, back to the point (and there was one, honest). With All-Winners Comics #19, Cap brought together a team of heroes, named the All Winners Squad. Bit of an arrogant, egotistical name if you ask us, but who are we to argue with a man that has the ability to take your eyebrows off with a shield from 40 yards. Making up the All Winners Squad with Cap we had Namor the Sub-Mariner, Miss America, Whizzer and the original Human Torch. The group first came together to take down Ibsa and a particular plan that involved stealing an atomic bomb.

With Cap's friends and foes ever-growing, a familiar face would return in 1947's Captain America Comics #61; a familiar red face. Yep, old Johann was back again. Not to worry, the Sentinel of Liberty promptly sent the Red Skull packing once again. A couple of issues down the line, in Captain America Comics #63, a new villain raised his beak as we were given the debut of The Parrot. If you've never heard of him, just Google him so that you can see how ridiculous he looks. Seriously, The Parrot looks as if the Toxic Avenger did the horizontal hustle



with Orville the Duck.

Up until that point, all had been pretty much smooth-sailing for Captain America. Yes, he'd gone up against a lot of Nazis and dealt with regular villains-of-the-week fodder, but these challenges were always surpassed by the American icon. With 1948's *Captain America Comics* #66, our hero was given his first real taste of cold, hard trauma when Bucky was shot. Not to worry, Cap's loyal sidekick would eventually recover but he was out of action for a while. Of course, Bucky's best moments were to come much later, and they'll be detailed in Part 2 of this piece. (Sorry, we're slaves to chronology!) With Bucky now on the sidelines, Cap got himself a new sidekick in the form of Betsy Ross. A long time 'swell pal' of Cap and Bucky's, Ross took on the mantle of Golden Girl. Apparently she got that name after killing off all of the other Golden Girls in a Highlander-esque 'there can be only one' beheading spree. Sadly, we jest.

Complete with Golden Girl at his side, Cap would go on some of his most bizarre adventures to date. Clearly, with the war now over, the writers were struggling with what exactly to do with Captain America. So, what else do you do when you're struggling for ideas? Why, of course, you look to other worlds. With *Captain America Comics* #67, Cap and Golden Girl took off to Dimension Z, and 1949's *Captain America Comics* #70 saw the duo going up against a Martian invasion of Earth. Fighting little green men who speak a different language to you? I guess the modern-day equivalent would be trying to understand someone decked

out in fake tan and who's clearly had one too many blue WKDs on a Saturday night.

The future of Golden Girl and Captain America was brought to an abrupt stop just before the turn of the decade. By July 1949, *Captain America Comics* had reached 73 issues. As is ever the case with comic books, not to mention the fact of Cap's waning popularity, the next issue of the book was retitled *Captain America's Weird Tales*, which took on a more horror-heavy feel and featured a lot less Cap. In fact, following a bizarre tangle with the Red Skull, Satan and the Grim Reaper in October '49's *Captain America's Weird Tales* #74, the Sentinel of Liberty was stopped in his tracks. The book would continue with the *Captain America's Weird Tales* title, yet our hero was nowhere to be found. Taken out of the comic book battlefield, it would be a few years until we would once again see Captain America back on duty.

## RETURN TO ACTION

As the years went by, Captain America and his supporting characters remained out of the spotlight. All of that changed in the early 1950s, when Cap and Bucky Barnes were brought back into the comic book conscience to fight those damn Commies. With times having moved on from World War II, Cap was brought back to a world of shadowy goings-on, foreign agents, spies and deception. Cap's return was launched by *Atlas Comics* (the former *Timely Comics*, soon-to-be *Marvel Comics*) in the *Village People*-sounding *Young Men* book. In December 1953's *Young Men*

#24, Captain America was reintroduced as a member of the Young Men team that also featured Namor and the Human Torch. At this point, Steve Rogers was still a teacher, but he got the *Captain America* itch once more. As a wiser man than us once said, though, old heroes bring about old villains. And with that, the Red Skull also made a return in this post-World War II world.

This return for Cap did not go down well. Over the next year, the American legend would appear in several *Young Men* issues, make a couple of appearances in the equally doubletender-inducing *Men's Adventures*, and get a (very) brief relaunch of his own series. Bringing back the *Captain America* title for a mere three issues, #76-78, the decision was made to put a stop to *Captain America* once again. September '54's *Captain America* #78 saw Cap's final appearance for nearly a decade.

During this return, Cap was dubbed "Captain America... Commie Smasher." Catchy, no? And sticking to that nickname, Cap's 1954 farewell featured him going up against Electro. Before you get carried away, this isn't the same Electro, aka Max Dillon, which Jamie Foxx's character is based on in Marc Webb's upcoming *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. No, no, no, this is a different version of Electro; a Communist supervillain. Whilst this story, titled *His Touch is Death*, is notable for sending Cap into limbo for a while, it's also worth noting that the legendary John Romita Sr. carried out pencilling and inking work, with the story strongly believed to have come from the mind of Stan Lee. And like that, Captain America was back in storage.





## THIRD TIME'S A CHARM?

So we've had Captain America's initially-loved debut, we've had the massive dip in interest for the character once World War II was over, we've had his brief resurgence as a 'Commie smasher' and the non-plus reaction that garnered, and now, in the '60s, Marvel Comics decided to dust off the character and take another shot at making him relevant and interesting once again.

For Marvel Comics (yes, Timely Comics had undergone a name change by this point), the 1960s was an absolutely huge decade. During the period of a few years in the '60s, fans were introduced to the likes of the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, Iron Man and Thor. With all of these characters going on to generate large audiences, Marvel decided to bite the bullet and bring Captain America back into the fold.

Cap's '60s return to comic books is the stuff of legend. In his absence a little title by the name of *The Avengers* had started up. With March 1964's *The Avengers* #4, Captain America made his return with a bang. Despite various retellings of the story in the years that would follow, the '64 return of Captain America found the Avengers discovering a man frozen in ice, floating in the sea. I'm pretty sure the oddest thing we've seen floating in the sea is half an oak tree, a tyre, a couple of condoms and a turd. So, yeah, the Avengers did quite well to come across this frozen, presumed-dead, iconic superhero.

To set the scene, at this point the Avengers team was made up of Iron Man, Thor, Ant-Man and Wasp. The issue featured a mini-scuffle between the Avengers and a pissed off Sub-

Mariner, not to mention aliens with the ability to turn people into stone. The seeds for Cap's return, however, had been sown in November 1963's *Strange Tales* #114. In this issue, the Fantastic Four's Human Torch, aka Johnny Storm, fought a Captain America imposter. Supposedly, Cap's appearance, albeit an imposter, piqued the interest of fans.

In order to try and make Captain America relevant again, Marvel decided to focus on the idea of this war veteran, apparently frozen in ice since the final days of WWII (that brief 1950s return was deemed to be imposters), awakening in the '60s and having to deal with this strange new world that placed him way out of his comfort zone. To help him acclimatise to his new surroundings, Cap had the Avengers, as he swiftly became a member of Earth's Mightiest Heroes. It was revealed that the reason for Cap's deep-freeze was a result of a devious plan from Baron Zemo. Zemo laced a drone plane with explosives, which Cap and Bucky set about neutralising. Unfortunately for our heroes, the plane went boom, throwing Cap into the icy ocean below and killing Bucky.

Just as quick as Cap had joined up with the Avengers, he found himself back in action. *The Avengers* #5 saw Cap and his new bosom buddies take down a crazed Hulk; *The Avengers* #6 featured long-time Cap villain Baron Zemo; *The Avengers* #7 had the team going up against Kang the Conqueror; and Baron Zemo returned for another helping of 'shield to the face' in *The Avengers* #9. This reinvigorated Captain America would go on to appear in several other Marvel titles of the time, most notably in *Tales*

of Suspense where he found himself yet again often fighting Baron Zemo. (Seriously, how many beatings does it take before you get the message, sir?) Not to worry, though, as Baron Zemo finally met his demise (at least temporarily) in *The Avengers* #15, giving Cap at least a measure of revenge for the death of Bucky.

To show how much responsibility Steve Rogers had amassed in the Avengers team, *The Avengers* #16 saw Rogers lead a new, refreshed roster of heroes. In what would become a constant of the Avengers team, it was time for a change. Iron Man, Ant-Man, Wasp and Thor decided to leave, with Cap bringing in Hawkeye, Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch. Much like Hulk had left the team after only a couple of issues, this was the strongest example yet that the Avengers operated on a rotating roster of characters.

As well as being such a key member of the Avengers, Steve Rogers would go on to get some solo stories in the *Tales of Suspense* title. His first standalone tale since his resurrection came in October 1964's *Tales of Suspense* #58, which was a two-story issue that he shared with Iron Man. In fact, fans were given a retelling of Captain America's origins in March 1965's *Tales of Suspense* #63, complete with an appearance from Bucky Barnes. By the time *Tales of Suspense* #100 rolled around, the title had been renamed *Captain America*, giving him his own book once again.

Cap would spend the majority of the '60s struggling to deal with the modern world, fighting old villains, fighting new villains, joining the Avengers, disbanding the Avengers, relaunching



the Avengers and mourning for Bucky. The Captain America stories in the books at that point tended to vary from modern-day adventures to retrospective looks as the times of Cap's past. During one of these harks back to the good old days, we were given an introduction to a former love interest of Cap's: Peggy Carter. Peggy would first appear in May '66's *Tales of Suspense #77* and, whilst she would appear at various points over the years, the character was never as prominent as she is in the cinematic world that Marvel Studios and Disney have now created. In terms of villains, Cap still found himself tangled up with those of a Nazi persuasion, and, of course, the Red Skull would return at various points. A new villain came into the fold in *Tales of Suspense #75*, as fans were introduced to the deadly, devious and, err, leaping Batroc the Leaper (soon to be seen played by Georges St-Pierre in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*). The decade would also see Cap spend a lot of time fighting the likes of A.I.M. and the Sleepers, teaming with Nick Fury on several occasions.

July 1966's *Tales of Suspense #79* saw Cap again battling the dastardly Red Skull, but this time the Cosmic Cube came into play. A super-powered transmutation device, the Cosmic Cube was capable of making any wish or thought into reality. Those only familiar with the Marvel Cinematic Universe will likely know the Cosmic Cube as simply the Tesseract. At this stage, the Cosmic Cube was a creation of A.I.M., as was the Adaptoid; a man-made entity that debuted in *Tales of Suspense #82*. That particular character would evolve only a few issues later into the Super-Adaptoid, who was

dubbed a one-man Avengers.

Another new organisation would raise its head in *Tales of Suspense #85*, as Hydra appeared and kidnapped Cap's colleague, Agent 13. Whilst Cap would go on to rescue Agent 13, things were about to get shook up for our hero in *Tales of Suspense #88*. You know that in comic books people tend not to actually stay dead, right? Well *Tales of Suspense #88* not only featured the Red Skull's return (again!), but also reintroduced Cap's long-dead sidekick, Bucky Barnes. Now, this was a time before the whole Death of Superman ruined deaths in comic books for good, meaning that Bucky was in fact still dead. His apparent resurrection was all just a clever ploy by the Red Skull to mess with Cap's head. Bit of a dickhead thing to do, if you ask us. Not to worry, you Red Skull haters, for the villain would get his comeuppance in *Tales of Suspense #91*, where he was sunk in a highly-secretive government submarine. Now, we appreciate our Starburst audience aren't falling for that old parlour trick, so yes, the Red Skull will be back once again (and again, and again, and again...) further down the line.

The late '60s saw Cap have his first confrontation with the beastly half-man/half-machine M.O.D.O.K. in *Tales of Suspense #92*, and Steve Rogers' love-life took a turn for better in *Tales of Suspense #95*. Whether it was a case of things being different back in the '40s or just Steve Rogers being shit with women, the Sentinel of Liberty made a right bollocks of a date with the voluptuous Agent 13. With the date going swimmingly, our eager hero made the schoolboy error of proposing to her. I guess when you were

born in the 1920s and have been frozen in time for a decade or so, you may have a slight fear of becoming a lonely old man. Either that, or Agent 13 was holding back the goods and Rogers made a complete misjudgement in trying to seal the deal. In case you hadn't realised yet, 13 indeed turned down Cap's offer of marriage. Her exact reasoning was that her duty was to her country, but we reckon it was more a case that she thought of Cap as a slightly desperate, creepy old man that was just far too eager to show her his Super Soldier serum. Reacting like a moody teenager, Cap decided to quit the Captain America gig as a result. The following few months would see various imitators take a crack at the Captain America job, but Nicky Fury would use his charms to bring Rogers back to his shield.

## SOLD SERIES

As covered earlier, the *Tales of Suspense* title would become Captain America with its 100<sup>th</sup> issue. In the build up to this moment, Cap made a new friend and revisited an old foe. *Tales of Suspense #97* saw Cap answering a distress call from the country of Wakanda. This call was to assist the leader of Wakanda, the Black Panther, in an effort to protect the world from a savage solar ray. No longer a part of the Avengers team, Cap took the chance to make a new buddy, and get his red, white and blue arse across the globe. Upon arriving in Africa, Cap came to realise that the presumed-dead (isn't everybody in these stories) Baron Zemo was behind the solar ray, armed with a plan to destroy the world. Cap, along with Black Panther and Agent 13, took down the







man who was responsible for Bucky Barnes' death, then moved on to his own solo series once more.

No sooner had Captain America relaunched, in Captain America #101 we had another imposter, this time revealing that the recent Baron Zemo that Cap had fought was a phoney. This issue, though, would also see the return of the Red Skull. Seriously, is anyone keeping track of these Red Skull returns? Man, the guy is just like Katie Price; one drastically altered face and the inability to just stay out of the public conscience for even the smallest amount of time. I reckon the next time he returns, it'll be complete with his own perfume range and some abomination of a reality TV show.

Despite Cap and Agent 13 having been an item for a little while now, the Sentinel of Liberty didn't actually know the name of his beau. Whilst many would find that just a tad

unusual, for some reason, Captain America, the man with apparent super intelligence, didn't find any reason to ask his missus her name. In what could've played out as a brilliant Tootsie-type moment, Agent 13 revealed her name in Captain America #103 to be Sharon Carter. Yes, Cap was well and truly keeping it in the family as, at that point in time, Sharon was depicted as the younger sister of Cap's World War II love interest, Peggy Carter. Barely given time for this to sink in, Cap immediately had to rescue Sharon from the grip of the Red Skull (him again!).

The turn of the decade saw several run of the mill stories for Captain America and his cohorts. One of the few highlights was October 1968's Captain America #106 when Communist China created their own slightly mental, murderous and malicious doppelganger of Cap. Other than that, there were brief appearances from familiar faces like Batroc the Leaper, Madame Hydra and the Hydra organisation, and the Red Skull. Captain America #109 featured another retelling of Captain America's origin, and the following issue finally saw Steve Rogers give in and take on Rick Jones as his new sidekick. Just to demonstrate how much of a wise choice it was to take on Rick as his new Bucky Barnes, Jones quickly got himself kidnapped by Hydra. Clever boy.

The next few years saw Captain America develop a friendship with The Falcon (another character to be seen in this year's Captain America: The Winter Soldier). The pair initially began to train together in Captain America #117 and would get their own comic book title later in the 1970s. In amongst all of this and

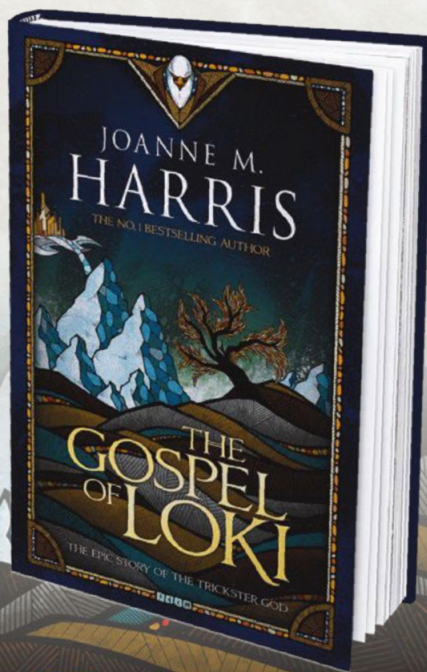
some further appearances by some now far-too-familiar faces, Steve Rogers quit the Captain America mantle at several points, one time to become a policeman in Captain America #139. August 1974's Captain America #176 would also see an equal amount of toys being thrown out of the pram as he again quit the Captain America gig and also knocked his Avengers association on the head.

With Captain America now apparently behind him, Steve Rogers took on a new name: Nomad. December 1974's Captain America #180 saw Rogers become sickened by the US government after discovering that an important official had been the leader of the terrorist group, the Secret Empire. What was controversial about this particular story arc is that it was alluded that the person in cahoots with the Secret Empire was then-President of the United States, Richard Nixon. Quite the ballsy move from Marvel. Seemingly determined to leave the hero life behind him, it took a heart-to-heart with Hawkeye to convince Rogers that he shouldn't give up on the idea of being a hero, even if he didn't feel like he could represent the USA anymore. Hence, Rogers became known as Nomad, meaning a man without a country.

And with this, we bring Part 1 of our Captain America comic book retrospective to a close. Be sure to check out Part 2 in next month's Starburst, where we have the return of Captain America identity (how did you guess?), the Skrulls, in-fighting, more Red Skull (natch), more revolving Avengers personnel, the very real events of 9/11, Civil War, the rise of one Winter Soldier and much, much more... ★



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# HURD MENTALITY



*Starburst sits down with THE WALKING DEAD's executive producer Gale Anne Hurd to discuss SEASON 4, PART 2...*

**Starburst: First, congrats on the show getting renewed for a 5th season!**

Gale Anne Hurd: Thank you! We're all so happy to be coming back. It's one big *Walking Dead* family and when we're not together we miss each other.

**One thing we love about you, from reading other interviews and catching your recent appearance on *Talking Dead*, is that you clearly care about these characters deeply. Let's start by talking about some reactions to the first half of Season 4...**

What I love is that we keep changing things up. One of the bold moves, I think, was to see the transition of Phillip, the Governor, essentially into Brian. At least initially someone who seemed like he was on the road to redemption, and that to me was a fascinating journey. In the end it didn't quite work out, but there was hope – and I think that's the remarkable thing. I had so many people saying to me, 'You know, maybe he really has turned over a new leaf!' So, if things hadn't gone awry, there was the possibility for hope. But we also saw, in the previous season, Michael Rooker as Merle sacrifice himself by letting an African American go. Here's this racist, willing to sacrifice himself for his brother and for this group of people who had become his brother's surrogate family. So I love seeing the growth and the changes in the characters and that's also so true for Carol.



Words:  
Vanessa Berben

Photos of Gale by Gene  
Page, courtesy of AMC.



**It is! We're so excited – we're really hoping she's going to come back. Fingers crossed...**

We love Melissa McBride, and if you follow her arc as a character – from a woman who was an abused wife to grow into someone who was so strong. If you look back now, if she hadn't surreptitiously trained the little girls and boys, Tyrese wouldn't have made it because they wouldn't have had the confidence and the training to pull the trigger and save him. So there's just so many little interesting things that are seeded very early on that you got to see play out over the course of those eight episodes.

**Let's dig deeper with that connection you made with hope. That's one of the overlaying themes of the entire series and plays a huge role in Rick's relationship with Carl. How do you see that playing out over to the next half of the season?**

That really is the backbone of the entire fourth season. It is the changing dynamic between father and son, between Rick and Carl. That is an arc that follows all the way through. Carl, who in the third season had grown pretty hard – who was able to pull the trigger without thinking and possibly kill someone in cold blood – to go from that to being willing, at his father's direction, to bond again with his father and become farmers. To see that you contribute in so many ways, a community requires so many different people to perform so many different tasks. And at the end of the day, his father loves him very deeply. Now we'll see how he feels after forming a new bond of trust with his father – if after the loss of the prison and the loss of Hershel, whether that's changed or whether that's estranged.

**Do you see Rick stepping it up more as a father and leader now that Hershel's gone?**

We'll have to see, because we ended the middle of the season with everyone flung to the four corners, so to speak. They're no longer the community, they're on the run – they're on the road.

**So... Got any Baby Judith theories?**

[Laughs] Do I have any Baby Judith theories? I have a lot of theories, but I also know what's really happened... so I've got a bit of an advantage there!

**We briefly touched on Carol earlier, but let's go back to her for a second, because her change over this season – over the course of the show – has been phenomenal. Is there a moment in particular this season where Carol stepped out to you as a strong character? Because let's be honest, Carol wasn't really our favorite until this season.**

But you know, we had to lay that pipe. And we couldn't have done it without an actress of the ability that Melissa McBride has to bring all those different colours to her character. Some people can change right away, some people change gradually. And what we find is that once you choose to live, once you choose to survive – we saw that with Andrea – you consciously choose to make sure you're no longer a victim anymore. And some people, like Carol, she wanted to make sure that no one is a victim, especially the defenseless. She couldn't save her daughter Sophia, she doesn't want that to happen again. But what also really struck me is that she didn't pretend or lie –

which she could have. She could've said to Rick, 'No, it wasn't me.' It's not like there's forensic science, they're not calling CSI and fingerprinting. But she didn't. And that's a degree of strength and a willingness to accept the consequences – something we never saw in Shane.

**Good connection! Why do you think she denied Lizzie in the prison? There was a moment where Lizzie slipped and called her 'mom' and Carol shot that down with the quickness. She seemed to deny that she'd ever even been a mother. Did you see that as her trying to move on, or is she trying to block out her past?**

I think that it's two-fold. I think that those kinds of connections would weaken the girls. She wanted to train them to stand up for themselves and not to rely on others to protect them. And I think she still feels the guilt over not being able to protect Sophia, who thought she would be rescued, who thought that running was enough – and it wasn't. So I think she's trying to make sure they have enough steel, and enough self-confidence or self-sufficiency, knowing that day's going to happen when they're going to need to have that reserve inside them. That everything is not going to continue to go well. It is the zombie apocalypse, and if it's not the walkers it's going to be humans with evil intentions. And as it turns out she was right.

**We're talking about Carol's reluctance to form connections, what about the relationship between our most solid couple, Glenn and Maggie? Will their relationship change now**





that Glenn's ego's taken a hit? First he was helpless after Maggie was seized by the Governor, then he was knocked out by flu and forced to hide on the bus that left the prison – will their connection change?

I've always seen their relationship as the real beacon of hope in the darkest of dark worlds. It's going to go through difficult periods in the best of circumstance, but I think love endures. And I think they have that kind of love.

**You've mentioned before that you have an affinity for Chad L. Coleman's character, Tyreese. He stepped it up the first half of this season as a source of leadership and had some amazing storylines – coming into his own as part of this group with his sister – what can fans expect from him when we come back?**

You're going to see Tyreese grow even more in terms of his being a leading man. I think he's going to be challenged as he's never been challenged before, and he's going to have to make some very, very, very difficult decisions. And once again, we are blessed with the best cast I've ever worked with, and Chad really brings it in the second half of the season. He really does. And I have a feeling that as with the two previous seasons there are going to be some cheers as well as some tears.

**He is just such an amazing actor, and the raw emotion you see out of him is just incredible. We loved the plot with Karen, and letting him finally connect with someone outside of his relationship with his sister. Do you**

**think he's ever going to be able to get past what Carol did? They were friends before she left!**

You know, that's one of the challenging things in this world. And we've seen the characters who can't get over things get destroyed by them, and that's a way they can be weakened. And that's a challenge all the characters have to face. It's something that I think lead to the end of Andrea. She was in denial about The Governor, she didn't want to believe that this perfect world, this Shangri-La, was run by a madman, a madman that she'd fallen in love with. So we've seen that kind of betrayal, and hopefully this won't be Tyreese's undoing.

**Let's keep going with the love – there's an idea circulating amongst fans that it would be really neat to see Daryl and Michonne get together as a couple – do you think that's something the show will ever entertain? Daryl left the camp with Beth and they seemed to connect before the attack as well – will fans ever get a Daryl love-interest?**

That's something I can't address! But at the same time, Daryl's gone through so much. Just as he was feeling not only part of the community, but one of the most respected and admired members of the community, he lost it all. And I'm sure he felt that Carol had betrayed him as well. There was a code and she broke that code. So is he ready for love? Probably not right away.

**Maybe it's more that we feel he's finally ready to let people in, and that's a big step for him.**

I think that he realizes now that the life

of a loner is not all that he thought it was. And if you pick the right people to let in, sometimes they'll break your heart – but the pain is worth it.



*The second half of THE WALKING DEAD's fourth season airs in the US on AMC, Sundays at 9pm, and in the UK on FOX, Mondays at 10pm.*



# MOVIE REVIEWS



## THE LEGO MOVIE

**Cert:** U / **Director:** Phil Lord, Christopher Miller / **Screenplay:** Phil Lord, Christopher Miller, Dan Hageman, Kevin Hageman / **Starring:** Chris Pratt, Elizabeth Banks, Will Arnett, Morgan Freeman, Will Ferrell, Liam Neeson, Charlie Day, Nick Offerman / **Release Date:** Out Now

The very concept of a LEGO movie seemed absurd. What else could it be but a crass marketing ploy to extend the reach of the ubiquitous building blocks even further into the hearts and minds of children everywhere, as well as into the wallets of their parents? Yet screenwriters and directors Lord and Miller have achieved the seemingly impossible and assembled a genuinely funny, touching, inspirational and absolutely lunatic love letter to those tiny bricks, as well as to imagination and creativity in general, that can't help but bring a smile to even the most stony of faces.

In a genius use of verisimilitude, everything in the world of the film is made up of LEGO pieces (with a few well-explained exceptions) and the animation style of the movie

stays true to the restrictions this imposes. Unlike the successful line of licensed LEGO video games, from LEGO Harry Potter to LEGO Star Wars, the dimensions of the minifigs are never obviously distorted for the sake of portraying drama. Characters will never close their claw-like hands around an object, instead "snapping" onto it. Neither will they bend their non-existent elbows to scratch their face or develop a knee to bend for the sake of a dramatic pose. It really does look like a movie made out of LEGO with everything, including elements like fire and water, all available in a box of LEGO somewhere.

In this world Emmet Brickowski (Pratt) is an unassuming citizen of Brickburg, working on a construction site, blindly following "The

Instructions" for every aspect of his life until he accidentally happens upon "The Piece of Resistance", the only thing capable of stopping Lord Business' (Ferrell) evil plans. Emmet is then swept up in an adventure to different LEGO worlds, such as "The Old West", learning to embrace his creativity, encountering numerous concussions and meeting a host of heroes along the way.

This simple synopsis belies a host of incredible detail as every step on Emmet's journey is lovingly filled with blink-and-you'll-miss them background sight gags and laugh out loud jokes for all ages. The clever plot focuses on the importance of creativity and imagination and constantly throws surprises at the audience. It may be a cliché

to say that providing any further detail would ruin the surprise, BUT the story takes some truly mind-boggling turns near the end that need to be experienced to be believed. A constant sense of "How did they get away with this" accompanies almost the entire movie.

What can be said is that The LEGO Movie must have been some lawyer's nightmare, as characters from all the various lines of LEGO get to interact with each other. Dumbledore and Gandalf share a scene; Superman appears numerous times, becoming increasingly irritated with Green Lantern and in an unexpected move, not only is Batman (Arnett) present, but he is one of the main characters and a major source of humour in a film littered with characters and clever references that demand repeat viewings.

The rest of the voice cast are uniformly excellent, Platt and Banks carrying the movie easily but Liam Neeson AND Morgan Freeman really shine. Neeson gleefully sends up his recent hard man image as both sides of the Good Cop/Bad Cop doppel, while Freeman's tie-dyed hippy Vitruvius plays on all the wise old man stereotypes that Freeman himself has contributed to over the years. If you listen carefully you might even catch a mini-reunion from another Lord and Miller film, 21 Jump Street.

The LEGO Movie confounds expectations and shows that there is still plenty of originality, inventiveness, fresh humour and most surprisingly of all, heart left in modern blockbusters, and it will inevitably result in a ton of LEGO being sold.

Iain McNally

**EXPECTED** 9

**ACTUAL** 10





## ROBOCOP

**Cert:** 12A / **Director:** José Padilha / **Screenplay:** Joshua Zetumer / **Starring:** Joel Kinnaman, Gary Oldman, Michael Keaton, Samuel L. Jackson, Abbie Cornish, Jackie Earle Haley, Michael K. Williams, Jennifer Ehle / **Release Date:** Out Now

For those few not familiar with the 1987 original, José Padilha's *RoboCop* mostly follows the same plot – it's 2028 and crime and terrorism are still rife. In Detroit, a large corporation called OmniCorp is developing the warfare technology of tomorrow – large robots accompanying trained men into battle. Only, they're not very popular with the public, especially when they shoot people who aren't perceived threats.

What they need is a man inside a machine. A more human touch. Some sort of... robot cop (well, cyborg actually). Step in Alex Murphy, a dedicated police officer who meets his untimely demise at the hands of the ruthless gang he's chasing. If this rings any bells, that's about where the similarities with Verhoeven's version stop.

As expected, the 12A classification of the film severely inhibits the dark humour and ultraviolence that made the original so popular. For starters (spoiler), Murphy is not sadistically blown to pieces, or even killed, but is blown up by a car bomb. In a change from

the first film, his family are well aware of his situation, as Murphy is himself, with Joel Kinnaman displaying some great acting amongst an all-star cast as the emotionally turbulent man living on in a cybernetic suit, unable to forget his attempted murder.

Unfortunately, you're not really rooting for him though – the street criminals are tossed aside in favour of the corporate bad guys, updated to a more PR/brand-concerned team of creatives headed by CEO Raymond Sellars (Keaton). The anger and desire for revenge is missing – while the 'bad guys' certainly lack ethics, they also lack personality, reflecting a more disinterested modern generation. What is interesting is how the date of *RoboCop* is unchanged – 2028 – the real-life bankruptcy of Detroit presumably making the sci-fi vision seem closer to reality.

There is no sense of cruel dystopia however, another theme from the original that added to the world Murphy inhabited and made you more interested in his fate, and the fate of those who

deserved to be taken in, dead or alive. There are a few hit-and-miss nods to the original, such as several (largely unimportant) ED-209s. Disturbing questions about the nature of humanity still raise their heads. Elements of cynicism remain – some are relatively hidden (look out for news tickers tapes), and some are more obvious and welcome, such as Samuel L. Jackson's brilliant right-wing TV anchor Pat Novak. However, there are no happy families playing Nukem and nothing is bought for a dollar.

Despite impressive CGI and a quick reimagining of Murphy becoming half-machine, Padilha's *RoboCop* only really gets going halfway through. A scene featuring a battle test for RoboCop impresses, and there's a brilliant sequence where he scans a friendly crowd for potential criminal suspects. *RoboCop* 2014 is sleeker and more driven by empathy than revenge, with a lot of emphasis on human relationships – particularly with sympathetic Dr Norton (Oldman), abrasive soldier

Rick Mattox (Haley) and Murphy's loving wife Clara (Cornish). There is no shortage of action but it is somewhat unfulfilling without a solid purpose, and although the ensemble cast's acting is exceptional, perhaps surprisingly so for an action movie, the film doesn't keep the momentum going when it should.

One can only wonder what Darren Aronofsky would have made of this, or even what Hugh Laurie may have added to the film, if anything. Fans of old may already be smirking ('It's a 12,' 'The suit's black,' 'He has his hand,' 'Lewis is a man!') but the film is definitely worth a watch on its own merit. The reboot is here, and it would be nice to see Robo kicking ass again (preferably an ass belonging to a nastier, certificate 18-rated bad guy).

**Jonathan Anderson**

**EXPECTED**  **6**

**ACTUAL**  **6**



## DEVIL'S DUE

**Cert:** 15 / **Director:** Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, Tyler Gillett / **Screenplay:** Lindsay Devlin / **Starring:** Zach Gilford, Alison Miller / **Release Date:** Out Now

Fears that the found footage film fad had faded appear to be unfounded in the wake of the recent release of the umpteenth entry in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, quickly followed by this must-try-harder effort from Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett, whose contribution to the original *V/H/S* anthology showed much more promise than this feature-length debut delivers. *Devil's Due* superficially looks a sure bet for the Halloween season crowd but on closer inspection it reveals itself to be little better than any number of similar cheapo horrors which lurk unloved in the nether regions of straight-to-DVD world.

It starts off brightly and breezily as loved-up newlyweds Zach (Gilford) and Samantha (Miller) set off on their honeymoon in the Dominican Republic. Naturally enough, they're filming every minute of it for the delight of future generations. On the last night of their holiday they take a taxi back to their hotel but find themselves taken to a dingy underground nightclub where much illicit booze is quaffed and an unconscious Sam becomes the centrepiece of an eerie supernatural ritual. Back

home in the good ol' US of A the couple's lives are disrupted by the unexpected news that Sam is pregnant. Family and friends share their joy... and then the creepy stuff starts...

The trouble is, we've seen all this creepy stuff before. *Devil's Due* manages to build up a decent sense of creeping dread

as the audience waits for the first signs of inevitable funny business and we can almost tick them off the list of horror movie clichés – spontaneous nosebleeds, ferocious tempers, suspicious barking dog, demonic eyes, banging and crashing. The 'found footage' gimmick itself creaks here like an old barn door and

the script has to leap through too many unlikely hoops to maintain its illusion that the story's all been recorded on Zach's camera, car park CCTV, supermarket security cameras and the phalanx of secret cameras rigged up around the couple's house by the mysterious and unexplained cult who have engineered Sam's unfortunate predicament.

Any fragile subtlety flies out of the window in the last act as *Devil's Due* can't decide whether it wants to be *The Exorcist*, *Rosemary's Baby* or *Paranormal Activity*, so instead decides to pilfer liberally from all of them. But despite all the blood, the shrieking, the demonic possession and scenes of people flying through the air, *Devil's Due* just ain't scary because it's doing nothing new with its box of tricks and seems happy to just wheel out familiar clichés with no real idea what to do with them.

To give the film its due though (ha), it passes the time, the performances are better than they really need to be but, like this reviewer, your soul may die just a little at the end at the realisation that a lot has been left unresolved and that the way has been paved for the inevitable sequel. *Devil's Due 2* anyone?

Paul Mount







## I, FRANKENSTEIN

**Cert:** 12A / **Director:** Stuart Beattie / **Screenplay:** Kevin Greivoux, Stuart Beattie / **Starring:** Aaron Eckhart, Bill Nighy, Miranda Otto, Jai Courtney / **Release Date:** Out Now

When a film so clearly takes its "inspiration" from those that have gone before, it's not unreasonable to expect it to add something to the formula. Not so with *I, Frankenstein*.

Like the eponymous monster, *Frankenstein* is a hideous assemblage of spare parts, in this case from the *Underworld* films and 2004's *Van Helsing*. It takes some of their visual styling and the motif of a secret war between legendary monsters, replacing vampires and werewolves with demons and gargoyles (yes... gargoyles!), spliced together with the concept from *Van Helsing* that Frankenstein's creature somehow holds the key to the war. *I, Frankenstein* adds nothing to this mix and even fails to meet the expectation set by the worst moments of either of those films.

Jumping off from where Mary Shelley's novel ended, Frankenstein's monster returns from the frozen North in 1795 to bury his creator, only to be set upon at the family plot. One of the attackers helpfully melts his own face off to reveal a demon head underneath and the battle is joined by winged stone creatures, who whisk the monster away for

a horrendous infodump from Miranda Otto's Leonore.

Charged by the Archangel Michael to battle demons, Leonore is leader of the order of the gargoyles who fear what plans the demons have for the monster. After being named Adam and taught how to "descend" the demons back to hell, the monster stops off at the weapons shed and returns to the generic "North".

After 300 years hiding in the wilderness, an attack prompts Frankenstein to return to the city to stamp out all the demons. No other motivation is given for his return, our "hero" does not come to some great realisation, he simply decides (after a second attack by demons) that now they must be wiped out, and it's not just the monster's motivation that seems half-baked. The whole film feels badly thought out and hastily arranged. The dialogue is lumpy, the plot plods from A to B to C to D (and sometimes back to C a number of times), never taking any narrative chances or surprising the audience in any way, and the whole thing is completely lacking in humour. There are some minor glimmers of style in some of the fight sequences but most of these

friendly sweep of their wings, seeing as they seem to have no undercover lives? Why can't either side get reinforcements from their respective bosses? Why has no one realised the demons' lair is ten minutes' walking distance from gargoyle HQ? Why is Adam seemingly indestructible in one scene and easily harmed in the next? Why does the whole film go out of its way to avoid naming the city, or even the country that the story takes place in? When trying to escape and backed against a window why does Adam bother to wait for Bill Nighy to finish his speech before jumping through it? Will Jai Courtney have any career left after this and last year's *A Good Day to Die Hard*? Why did Aaron Eckhart agree to do this?

Eckhart delivers a raspy performance as the monster, the minimal makeup not quite hindering his attractiveness, but he's not given all that much to do. He growls and glowers from scene to scene, while Otto poses and Nighy faxes over a copy of his performances as Marcus in the *Underworld* films, minus the violent neck twitching.

Any interesting ideas raised by the film, such as whether it's possible for Adam to have a soul or not, are completely glossed over in favour of another unimpressive action scene in this lazy and aggressively dumb film.

Iain McNally

**EXPECTED** +++++ 5  
**ACTUAL** ++ 2





## MR. PEABODY + SHERMAN

**Cert:** U / **Director:** Rob Minkoff / **Screenplay:** Craig Wright / **Starring:** Ty Burrell, Max Charles, Ariel Winter / **Release Date:** Out Now

There are certain readers out there who will see the images and adverts for DreamWorks' *Mr. Peabody & Sherman* and not even realise it is based on anything. And why should they? The advertising has not even alluded to these characters' roots and thus it seems this is only a big occasion for the party faithful. To fill in anyone in the dark, *Mr. Peabody & Sherman* is based on the Peabodys' improbable history segments that were a regular part of the late '50s/early '60s *Rocky and Bullwinkle* cartoon series. The premise was simple, the world's smartest dog (award-winning scientist, Olympian and businessman) Mr. Peabody adopted an orphan boy called Sherman and together the two travelled through history using their own time machine.

Here things are a little different. The father-son dynamic between Mr. Peabody (Burrell) and Sherman (Charles) is far more dwell upon and there are certain differences to the source material throughout. The plot sees

Peabody and Sherman encounter trouble throughout history when Sherman's classmate Penny (Winter) gets in between the two time travellers. *Mr. Peabody & Sherman* in some senses is a hard sell, in a market stuffed with animated features, but in many other ways is easy peasy – talking dog, time travel, Leonardo da Vinci acting like a prat! While fans born and bred on the original cartoons will undoubtedly find fault in the character tweaks, voices and plot, there is a lot to enjoy in Rob (*The Lion King*) Minkoff's film.

*Mr. Peabody & Sherman* is warmly unoffending family viewing. The film offers some very worthwhile and admirable messages for younger audiences, messages about respecting parental figures and accepting our guardians, and its greatest achievement is that it might just engage kids in certain historical events, whilst adults can have a chuckle at some of Peabody's delightfully corny puns (who doesn't love a punning Beagle?)

and historical observations.

Undoubtedly, the film has its setbacks and looking into it there are a few. For instance, the plot is zippy and energetic but the final third really becomes somewhat chaotic, combining too many historical figures and elements for its own good. As well as this,

the character of Penny initially grinds your gears – it was not the best tactic, introducing her in a somewhat realistic bullying scene. The plot is pretty unoriginal, and so the parental issues and adventurous mishaps are all as expected; that being said we shouldn't forget the intended audience. As a family offering *Mr. Peabody & Sherman* is a nice safe bet for fun. At 92 minutes the pace is steady, the 3D is not garish and despite some liberties with the source material, this is not the hatchet job that *Top Cat – The Movie 3D* was (no prison rape gags here, thankfully).

If you were to draw a direct comparison to any other film, *Mr. Peabody & Sherman* is like 2001's *Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius*. The energy is constant, the voice work is snappy (particularly Burrell as the Sherlockian pooch Peabody) and Craig Wright's screenplay is incessantly silly but occasionally warm, witty and it even makes time for a slight *Raiders of the Lost Ark* homage. You may not be talking about *Peabody & Sherman* when 2014 ends and it makes no solid impact of any kind but you'll have inoffensive fun with the family and that has to be worth the trip. Plus you get an amusing Oedipus gag, can't be bad!

**Jack Bottomley**

**EXPECTED** ++++++ 5

**ACTUAL** ++++++ 7





# DVD + BLU-RAY REVIEWS



## MYSTERIOUS CITIES OF GOLD - SEASON 2

DVD + BD / Cert: PG / Director: Jean-Luc Francois / Screenplay: Various / Release Date: Out Now

Making a sequel to a beloved TV series almost 30 years after the original ended is a risky business to say the least. Not only are you looking to do it in a way that will engage your new, younger audience, but you also have to appeal to the fan base that grew up with the series all those years ago. It's a fine balancing act that Blue Spirit Animation have largely gotten right with the second series of *Mysterious Cities of Gold*.

The story picks up a short time after the first series ended, with our heroes meeting up again in Barcelona. After a jailbreak, they set off to China in search of the next city of gold. As with the first series, the less you know about the story, the more enjoyment there is to be had from it, and while it is fair to say that some of the wonder and magic

of the original series is lacking here, it is still a compelling and engaging story that you soon become engrossed in again.

If you are a fan of the original series, there are some things that take a little getting used to. The first is the theme tune. Not only has the opening narration been removed completely, but the main theme has been altered to have more of an oriental sound to it. It grates a little at first, a bit like your favourite singer reimagining your favourite song, you get used to it and actually start to love it.

The second is the new voice cast. All of the voice actors do a fine job and you soon settle into their performances and after a while mostly don't notice it. If anything Mendoza is the toughest voice to get used to, but that is only because Howard

Ryshpan gave such a distinctive performance as the character in the original series, it's difficult to imagine any other voice coming out of Mendoza's mouth.

The updated animation has a clean, sharp and bright look to it, that both honours the original and updates it for its new audience, while still giving the show a unique look that sets it apart from most other cartoons on TV at the moment. It's a testament to the creative team that they have managed to produce a series that is so respectful of what came before, following the plans for the series that were laid out by Jean Chalopin all those years ago.

While it has to be said that this series does lack some of the magic and wonder that the original revelled in at times, its storytelling is tight, managing

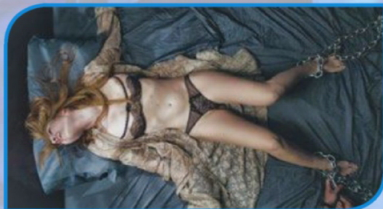
to be compelling and engaging throughout. Like the first series, it is ideal box set viewing and after waiting the best part of 30 years for this one, Season 3 can't come soon enough.

**Extras:** Series guide booklet

Stuart Mulrain

**RATING** ★★★★★★ 9





## KISS OF THE DAMNED

DVD + BD / Cert: 18 / Director & Screenplay: Xan Cassavetes / Starring: Josephine de la Baume, Roxane Mesquida, Milo Ventimiglia, Anna Mouglalis / Release Date: Out Now

*Kiss of the Damned* is the first feature film from Xan Cassavetes, daughter of Hollywood legend John, following her 2006 documentary, *Z Channel: A Magnificent Obsession*. Here we have a vampire movie that harks back to the Gothic romances of yesteryear; stylish tension, splatter and sex are the orders of the day.

The story of *Kiss of the*

*Damned* revolves around Djuna (de la Baume) and Paolo (Ventimiglia). Djuna is a vampire who does her best to resist the sexual advances of Paolo, knowing that she can't allow him to get too close for fear of her urges getting the better of her. With some assurance from Paolo that he's ready for what's to come, Djuna gives into her deepest instincts and leaves her beau with

a love bite that's sure to sting. As a result, Paolo becomes a vampire and the pair plan to see out immortality together. Being the well-meaning, none-threatening vampires that they are, they also look to assuage their baser instincts by harvesting blood from animals rather than attacking humans. Surely that's worth some brownie points, right?

As ever, the couple's bliss cannot last forever, and their world is brought to a standstill by the arrival of Djuna's sexually charged (isn't everyone in this movie?) sister, Mimi (Mesquida). Mimi doesn't have quite the same morals as her sister; she's happy to feed her bloodlust anyway that she can. As the greater vampire community becomes part of the fold, Mimi looks to drive a wedge between Djuna and her 'one true.'

*Kiss of the Damned* delivers a vampire tale that is something unique and different in this world of *Twilight* and *True Blood*. There's a style and vibe to the film that is similar to, in more modern fare, *Stoker*, but that also draws on the glossy, rich textures of European filmmakers

such as Dario Argento and Lucio Fulci. Cassavetes' movie may not be quite up to the standard of the films it is inspired by, but it has a damn good go of delivering something in a similar vein.

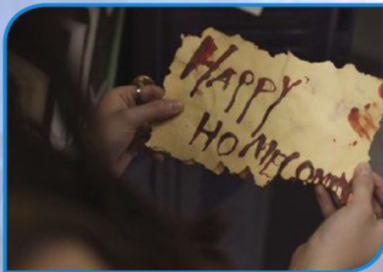
The performances are fine for what they are, with Anna Mouglalis and Michael Rappaport stealing scenes at any given opportunity. Adding to the experience that Cassavetes is offering to her audience, we get treated to an absolutely stunning soundtrack that sounds like an amalgamation of Ennio Morricone, American Prayer-era Doors and Black Rebel Motorcycle Club. Quite the combination.

If you like your vampire films to have a brooding, sinister, Gothic charm – not to mention lots of hot, panty sex – *Kiss of the Damned* is well worth hunting down.

Extras: None

Andrew Pollard

RATING +++++



## BLOODY HOMECOMING

DVD / Cert: 15 / Director: Brian C. Weed / Screenplay: Jake Helgren / Starring: Jim Tavaré, Rae Latt, Lexi Giovagnoli / Release Date: March 10th

Accidentally murderous teens battle a pissed off fireman's-outfit-wearing psychopath in *Bloody Homecoming*, a cheap riff on the likes of *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, minus a great deal of the panache and sheen that made the latter so palatable.

Strains of *Halloween* in the film's musical cues aim for something better, but they're not fooling anyone. Everything – from the masked psycho to the high school setting and sinister notes left in lockers – has been done and parodied

endlessly to death since the nineties. There's even a creepy janitor who should have been played by Michael Berryman or Brad Dourif. The influence of Wes Craven and his most successful imitators (chiefly the underrated *Urban Legend* and the aforementioned *I Know What You Did Last Summer*) looms large over this uninspired slasher melodrama.

A more seasoned director and cast of better actors might have salvaged something, but *Bloody Homecoming* is an absolute, abject exercise in low-budget laziness. It gets better once it does away with the high school hijinks and starts with the killing, but it never rises above the level of mere distraction. Neither nasty nor original enough to be memorable, it's not even bad enough to earn itself an ironic watch. Not that it doesn't try with lines like 'yes, I am nice, Lauren!' and a ten minute gloating speech from the villain that felt overdone in the first three times they did it a *Creem*.

It's always good to see a

slasher villain bedecked in a blue-collar workman's outfit (it worked well for the Maniac Cop and Harry Warden) and *Bloody Homecoming* has a good one, but in this case it's utterly wasted. There's nothing wrong with staying firmly within one's comfort zone, but *Bloody Homecoming* isn't any good at that either. This bloodless homecoming is a decidedly limp affair.

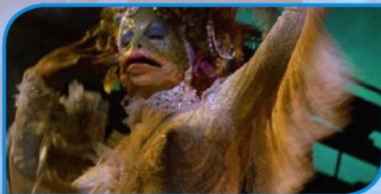
Extras: None

Joel Harley

RATING +++







## HELL COMES TO FROGTOWN (1988)

BD / Cert: 15 / Director: Donald G. Jackson / Screenplay: Randall Frakes / Starring: Julius LeFlore, Roddy Piper, William Smith / Release Date: Out Now

In a world (yes, it's that kind of movie) where the ravages of nuclear war have taken their toll – leaving the majority of the human race infertile – one man stands alone with the power to save the planet, one shag at a time. His name... is Sam Hell.

The trouble is, Sam (Piper) is under arrest by what's left of the authorities and the only way he can regain his freedom is to sell his plentiful sperm count

to MedTech and agree to go out into the wastelands to fertilise the population. Sadly for him, it would appear that they're out of turkey basters, so he'll have to do it the old-fashioned way. Reluctantly, Sam signs up and finds himself en route to Frogtown, a frontier settlement where the populace took the brunt of the radiation poisoning, creating a bizarre species of frog people. Yes, frog people.

There's some other stuff, but to be honest by this point it's fairly circumstantial.

Arriving at the forefront of the VHS boom when producers such as Charles Band would put any old tosh together to entertain the masses, this schlocky classic fulfils most of the criteria. The story is nonsense, the dialogue cheesy and the performances are carved rather than honed. But, somehow, it works.

While this is considered a classic, it is by no means up there with the likes of *They Live* for example (Piper's follow-up movie). It falls short in the action stakes and while the frog thing is certainly innovative, the rest is a little too run-of-the-mill. But there's still lots to like. Piper seems to be having fun with the role and it's contagious, while the effects are (for their day) commendable. Honestly, with a title like *Hell Comes to Frogtown* you know what's in store and that's what you get, no more and no less.

The extras are where this release excels. Rather than just throw a new transfer out into

the market, the distributor has tracked down Roddy Piper (who at 59 appears to be battling more with his teeth, than mutant frogs these days). In *Grappling with Green Gargantuans*, Piper talks about his experiences making the film in a manner which (unlike most polished press-kit interviews) is honest and not entirely positive and all the more interesting and compelling for that. *Creature Feature Creator* talks to Steve Wang, the (now legendary) effects man behind the frogs who at the time worked for next to nothing to make a name for himself (and because he really liked frog people), while *Amphibian Armageddon* is an interview with Brian Frank, who played the villainous frog, Commander Toty. These along with an extended scene really make this a worthy release of a slice of cinema's more digestible cheese.

Extras: See above

Grant Kempster

RATING **+++++**



## JUSTIN AND THE KNIGHTS OF VALOUR

DVD + BD / Cert: U / Director: Manuel Sicilia / Screenplay: Matthew Jacobs, Manuel Sicilia / Starring: Antonio Banderas, Rupert Everett, Freddie Highmore / Release Date: Out Now

Shrek alumni Antonio Banderas and Rupert Everett reunite in another fantasy world for another tale of an unlikely hero stepping up to the plate to save the day. As times change and Shrek diluted his profitability with a series of declining sequels (the brilliant second film aside), DreamWorks' *How to Train Your*

*Dragon* is the reference point here.

Justin and the *Knights of Valour* certainly looks the part, set in a lush green fantasy world occupied by dragons, barbarians and curiously busty barmaids. Its cast is strong too (literally, in the case of baddie Mark Strong), with Freddie Highmore doing well as young Justin. He's well supported

by Banderas (the best thing in it), Everett (the second best thing in it), Charles Dance and the like. Almost everyone appears to be coasting on established routines – particularly Mark Strong, who adds yet another humourless posh villain to his CV. Only Saoirse Ronan is outright bad, her Irish accent a pain to the ears. Odd, given that the accent is actually the actress's own.

The lack of inspiration carries through to the plot and script, which lack both excitement and wit. Only a mid-flight fight sequence with Gustav the crocodile is of amusement, the rest of the story veering between *Stardust* rip-off and DreamWorks wannabe. Without the heart of Pixar and the wit of DreamWorks, *Justin and the Knights of Valour* is left entirely middling, the script barely managing to raise more than a smile throughout (usually succeeding only when Banderas is about).

The Blu-ray is available both in 2D and 3D, so you've a choice of dimensions to be underwhelmed in. It also comes loaded with a series of production

and making-of featurettes, as well as deleted scenes and cast and crew interviews. Sadly, with the film itself failing to ignite audience interest, it's unlikely that anyone will ever bother to watch them.

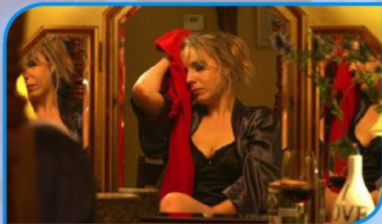
Too dull for children and not clever enough for adult audiences, *Justin and the Knights of Valour* is a failure. Thoroughly average, the only thing of valiance here is Antonio Banderas's film-salvaging performance.

Extras: See above

Joel Harley

RATING **++++**





## THE ADORED

DVD / Cert: 15 / Director: Carl Medland, Amarjeet Singh / Screenplay: Jody Medland / Starring: Laura Martin-Simpson, Ione Butler / Release Date: February 24th

This low-budget psychological thriller, shot in North Wales, may be a little leaden for some viewers but rewards perseverance.

Recovering from personal problems, not least with her marriage, model Mia (Butler) spends some time away with successful photographer Francesca (Martin-Simpson) in the hope of kick-starting

her career. The shoots go well, and as the pair start to bond, passions and insecurities come to the fore; their respective weaknesses and obsessions threaten to cause problems, not least when Francesca seduces Mia, who is prone to sleepwalking. Elsewhere, in a psychiatrist's chair, Adrian (Maskall) is attempting to come

to terms with both his anger issues, and his own obsession that his wife is having an affair.

For what, on paper, looks like a routine Sapphic thriller, *The Adored* manages to pull together enough twists to keep the interest without becoming too clichéd. The female leads are both outstanding, playing believable, if not altogether likeable characters. It's a powerful story of obsession and possessiveness, which no doubt many can relate to. While it may be troubling, perhaps, that the story somewhat perpetuates the myth of mental illness naturally leading to violence and abuse, paralleled in both narrative threads, the way they tie together is handled brilliantly.

It makes great use of the beautiful remote Welsh locations – even if does erroneously claim that Plas Tan-Yr-Allt, the house at Tremadog where Percy Shelley lived in 1812, was the dwelling in which *Frankenstein* was conceived. The score is a little intrusive at times; overpowering some scenes, particularly early on.

Nitpicking aside, this is an engaging tale which benefits from going in knowing as little as possible about it. It manages to cunningly shift the focus just when you think you are getting a handle on the situation; waiting all along for the inevitable explosion of passion.

**Extras:** Trailer / Two music videos from Welsh singer-songwriter, Peach

Martin Unsworth

RATING **★★★★★**



## OUTPOST: RISE OF THE SPETSNAZ

DVD + BD / Cert: 18 / Director: Kieran Parker / Screenplay: Rae Brunton / Starring: Bryan Larkin, Ivan Kamaras, Michael McKell, Velibor Topic / Release Date: March 10th

The latest instalment of the *Outpost* series features a lot that will be familiar to fans of the previous two films. Yes, yes, yes, there are Nazi zombies aplenty. This time around, though, we find the action set in Eastern Europe during World War II as a group of highly-trained Russian military types seek to take down the Nazi threat. Given the ending

of *Outpost II: Black Sun*, we were a little surprised with this sequel going all the way back to WWII. That said, it works.

After the Russian group botch an ambush attempt, they are taken captive and locked up in a Nazi prison bunker. It's soon revealed that, as well as the threat of Nazis, there is also the looming peril of some modified

Nazi 'super-zombies' to contend with. Whilst that may sound crazy, we're pretty sure if you are watching a Nazi zombie film then you've already left your logic at the door. Wishing to test out these created monsters, the leader of the Nazi group (McKell) sees the new captives as the perfect mixture of bait and of a measuring stick for how up to standard these beasts are. What ensues is much bloody violence, some rather great little action scenes, and some zombies doing their best Hulk Hogan 'Hulking Up' impressions.

The third in the *Outpost* series sees Kieran Parker finally take on directing duties. Having written and produced the first *Outpost*, then produced the second, it's a natural fit for him. He uses similar tones, colours, angles and scoring to the previous two films, breeding familiarity for the viewer. He also throws in a shit-ton more blood, guts and action. Leading from the front on the action side is Larkin. As the leader of the Russian group, he impresses here. Once you get over the fact that both

Russian and German forces all speak 'English-with-an-accent' throughout the film (we'll never understand that), then you can buy Larkin as a good, hard-hitting Russian badass.

Now for the zombies... they're actually rather good. Without the biggest budget in the world, the film creates impressive zombies, utilising the tools at its command and making the best of them. There are no plodding, moping zombies here; they have intent, purpose and an appetite, and they're brutal with it.

*Outpost: Rise of the Spetsnaz* is a gore-soaked, action-packed battle of the species that triumphs. Sure, there are hulls, but then there's lots and lots of zombies meeting fists. One of the best zombie films in recent memory, series fans and genre fans alike will find something here to enjoy.

**Extras:** None

Andrew Pollard

RATING **★★★★★**





## DEVIL IN THE WOODS

DVD / Cert: 15 / Director: Darren Lynn Bousman / Screenplay: Darren Lynn Bousman / Starring: Stephen Moyer, Mia Kirshner, Allie Macdonald / Release Date: March 3rd

Darren Lynn Bousman follows up the queasy thrills of his 2010 remake of *Mother's Day* and his icky entries into the *Saw* franchise with a much more dialled-down and subtle effort which benefits enormously from its direct-to-DVD/reduced budget status. With the need to aim for the multiplex jocular removed, Bousman has created a more intriguing movie

which covers territory admittedly over-familiar to horror genre aficionados but which also manages to offer a welcome and unexpected ambiguity to its ostensibly mundane narrative.

Richard Vineyard (*True Blood*'s Moyer - the movie's biggest surprise is hearing him speak in his natural British accent rather than his Bon Temps drawl) tries

to bring peace to a fractured family dynamic which sees his new wife, son, and stepdaughter at odds with one another. He takes them to the remote Pine Barrens (where he vacationed with his father as a child) but a campfire story about the legendary local beast known as the Jersey Devil awakens memories of his own traumatic childhood. Before long Richard's shaky grip on sanity turns into paranoia as he suspects his new wife is being unfaithful and that something monstrous and blood-crazed is lurking in the woods. But is the Jersey Devil really out there slaughtering unsuspecting campers or is the killer someone closer to home?

*Devil in the Woods* (US title *The Barrens*, fact fans) wears its influences in plain sight, marrying the conventions of the 'monster in the woods' horror movie with a bit of *Blair Witch* bravado and just a dash of the stargazing mad psychopathic stalker thriller thrown in for a bit of colour. Moyer's good value as the deranged Vineyard, his transformation from eager-to-please family man to potentially

murderous lunatic played with just the right amount of scenery-chewing mugging, and his attacks on his own family evoke a similar gut-churn reaction to some of the more extreme nastiness of the director's own earlier, higher profile genre work. There's a charming *Blake's 7* shonkiness to some of the movie's ambitious practical effects (alongside some cut-price CGI) but the script never betrays its core conceit, that sometimes the very worst monsters are those which our own sometimes fragile minds create from their own special darkness. There are some pacing issues and moments when the production could clearly have done with a few more dollars but, for a movie shot in just eighteen days, *Devil in the Woods* is an assured and curiously haunting effort from a director whose career is clearly still a work-in-progress.

Extras: None

Paul Mount

ACTUAL +++++



## WE ARE WHAT WE ARE

DVD + BD / Cert: 18 / Director: Jim Mickle / Screenplay: Nick Damici, Jim Mickle / Starring: Bill Sage, Kelly McGillis, Ethan Suplee, Odeya Rush / Release Date: March 3rd

In the past few years director Jim Mickle has risen to prominence with some low budget genre films including *Mulberry Street* and *Stakeland*. Although the idea and vision was there, Mickle was ill served by the budgetary limitations on both occasions. His new film is a remake of the 2010 Mexican cannibal drama *We Are What*

*We Are* and it manages to be that rare beast, a remake better than the original, one that proves that Mickle is a great storyteller.

Flipping things around from the beginning of the original, this time the matriarch of the Parker family collapses and dies during a flood in small town Delaware, USA. This means that the father Frank (Sage) has to step up and

take care of kids Alyce, Iris and Rory. Through excellently paced storytelling and the discoveries of the townsfolk, we learn that the Parker family are actually cannibals and have lived this way for centuries due to a diary handed down through the decades from colonial times which the Parkers use as their bible. When bone fragments wash downriver after the flood, suspicions deepen about the family, who then start to unravel.

*We Are What We Are* is Mickle's most coherent and well-made film so far. It has an unfussy, classic style that recalls the work of directors like Frank Darabont and more recently Jeff Nichols. In another director's hands this could have been an exploitative gorefest, but Mickle only uses violence when it's absolutely necessary, and when it does occur it's all the more shocking because of the wonderful pace and story structure. Cinematographer Ryan Samul gives the film a rich and deep palette that really adds to the atmosphere, and the film is different enough from the

original to stand on its own, even if it does lose some of the commentary by transposing the story from Mexico to the USA.

For a long time Bill Sage has been a minor supporting player, popping up in small roles in films like *American Psycho* and *Mysterious Skin*, but here he is given the key role as Frank Parker. It proves to be a major transformation for him and he is brilliant as a man who is slipping away both from himself and his family and is full of barely contained rage. Sage is backed up by wonderful young actors Odeya Rush, Ambur Childers and Jack Gore as well as receiving reliable support from Michael Parks and Kelly McGillis.

*We Are What We Are* is a truly great piece of macabre Gothic Americana with superb performances and we can't wait to see what Mickle does next.

Extras: TBC

Chris Holt

RATING +++++



## FRANKENSTEIN - THE TRUE STORY

**DVD / Cert: 12 / Director: Jack Smight / Screenplay: Christopher Isherwood, Don Borchardt / Starring: James Mason, Leonard Whiting, Michel Sarrasin, David McCallum, Jane Seymour, Nicola Pagnon, Tom Baker, John Gielgud / Release Date: March 10th**

Fans of Mary Shelley's classic Gothic horror tale of mad science and bodily reanimation have been understandably vexed by the travesty of *I, Frankenstein* currently stinking out multiplexes worldwide (were the words from the Producers of *Underworld* not enough of a warning for you?). Hopefully they've found some solace in the slew of archive

Frankenstein features which have been exhumed in anticipation of or in the wake of the modern Prometheus's return to the silver screen. Like most adaptations of *Frankenstein*, this ambitious, sprawling 1973 two-part American TV mini-series takes liberties with the original text – generally a mercy as it's a turgid read at best – but is still a faithful and visually stunning

take on a story which sometimes seems just a bit too familiar.

After his younger brother tragically drowns, Victor Frankenstein (Whiting) becomes obsessed with the idea of bringing back life to the dead. A chance encounter with Dr Henry Clerval (McCallum) leads Victor into a course of experiments with solar energy to help realise Clerval's dream of creating a race of physically perfect human beings constructed from salvaged body parts. But on the eve of his moment of triumph, Clerval dies. Victor carries on Clerval's work and brings to life "Adam", a stunning human facsimile who quickly becomes the toast of London society. But Clerval's process is flawed and soon "Adam" begins to physically deteriorate and Victor starts to reject his inhuman creation...

For the most part, *Frankenstein: The True Story* is a rich and rewarding interpretation, casting the creature not as a monster but as an Adonis who slowly decays into a powerful, confused aberration. He's worlds away from the neck-bolts and

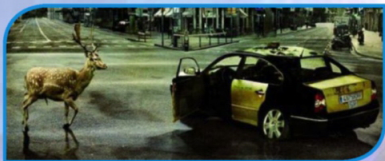
square head of the classic Universal movies; "Adam" is achingly sympathetic, almost pitiful as his friend Victor turns against him and he finds himself alone and confused in a world he never asked to be born into. The first ninety-minute instalment rattles along magnificently but the second half, where James Mason's fruity Dr Polidori takes centre stage and Jane Seymour is introduced as the female 'creature' Prima, is less engaging and seems to have lost its focus as it adds flesh and character to the original storyline.

But it's a gloriously impressive production – big bucks were spent on this one – with an intelligent script, breathtaking production design and earnest performances. It's a slog at over three hours, but it's recommended if you feel the need to wash your brain clean of the image of Aaron Eckhart's six-pack creature fighting CGI demons.

**Extras:** Introduction by James Mason

**Paul Mount**

**RATING**



## THE LAST DAYS

**DVD / Cert: 15 / Director: David Pastor, Àlex Pastor / Screenplay: David Pastor, Àlex Pastor / Starring: Quim Gutiérrez, José Coronado / Release Date: February 24th**

Three months after an outbreak known as the Panic, which saw an unexplained spread of agoraphobia so extreme that anyone going outside is literally scared to death, computer programmer Marc, who was trapped in his office when the outbreak hit, attempts to cross the city to find his girlfriend Julia, journeying through sewers and underground tunnels until he finds her.

Post-apocalyptic films are never going to go out of fashion. Their requirements of small casts, sparse sets and simple stories

mean that their settings are perfect for independent and low-budget filmmakers who might not have access to ridiculous amounts of studio funding. *The Last Days'* vision of the deteriorating society of Barcelona is rendered in a simple yet striking manner. Shopping centres and underground stations are populated by small groups huddled around burning oil drums, people argue over bottles of water, rats chewing on corpses go unremarked upon and ignored, and thugs with guns are the most powerful individuals around.

We also get occasional glimpses of the empty desolation of the outside streets, the bright light of the sun almost mocking in its inviting temptation, willing people to give up their miserable life of cramped squalor and embrace the fatal freedom of open space. When we see someone being affected by the Panic, their terror is signified by sharp camera angles, blinding lights and tinny flares of sound, as if their very senses are overwhelming all comprehension of their own existence.

Even though the spread of the outbreak is worldwide, the far-reaching implications for the rest of the world are only briefly touched upon. The cause of the pandemic is never revealed – nor even more than superficially speculated upon – and seeing as it's effectively irrelevant this is a good thing. An investigation into what caused everyone's intense agoraphobia would be a distraction, as even if it were discovered there would be little anyone could do about it. This is a much more personal tale, doubtless only one of any number of similar struggles taking place at the same time

anywhere in the world.

What makes Marc so relatable is that he's utterly unremarkable. Possessing no special knowledge or relevant skills, his relentless determination to be reunited with Julia keeps both him and the viewer equally focused on the path ahead and fearful for the dangers it holds, especially when he makes a discovery about her halfway through the film. His companion Enrique, previously a management consultant at Marc's office, is on an equally personal mission to reach the hospital his father was being treated in. Throughout the journey, their conversations about the thoughts and feelings that keep them going make us empathise with their plight and wish for them to succeed. This is the final message the film leaves us with, that even when living a perpetual nightmare trapped in a crumbling city of a decaying world, there is always still hope.

**Extras:** None

**Andrew Marshall**

**RATING**





## FROST

DVD / Cert: 15 / Director: Reynir Lyngdal / Screenplay: Jon Atli Jonasson / Starring: Bjorn Thors, Anna Gunnidis, Helgi Bjornsson / Release Date: Out Now

Given that Iceland's most distributed film of all time is 2009's *Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre*, it's no surprise that RWW's producers Julius Kemp and Ingvar Thordarson are trying to recreate that film's success with another horror feature, working with director Lyngdal to bring us *Frost*. The story here centres on Agla (Gunnidis) and Gunnar (Thors), a couple who find themselves stranded, alone and spooked, atop a glacier. Agla is a researcher and, along with some colleagues, has been carrying out work on the glacier, whilst Gunnar is her filmmaker partner who has come to visit her.

Events take a sinister turn when erratic flashing lights appear in the sky and strange, aggressive rumblings emanate from the treacherous depths below them. Things only get creepier when they finally manage to find some of Anna's colleagues, who happen to have blood pouring from their noses and are acting a tad peculiar.

Unfortunately, what is a visually stunning film – it was filmed on an actual glacier, y'know? – with an interesting premise is often let down by a flat story and the found footage shooting technique at its worst. It's fair to say that the way *Frost* is shot assaults your sense, but not in a good way. Rather than feeling uneasy, on edge and awaiting slow, peek-through-your-fingers reveals, the viewer is more likely to experience extreme motion-sickness thanks to the distinct absence of terra firma.

Whilst the film does start promisingly enough, the filmmakers seem as lost as those on screen. Even though *Frost* clocks in at around the 1 hour 15 minute mark,

you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd been dragged in for Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy; it just seems drawn out, dull and energy-sapping.

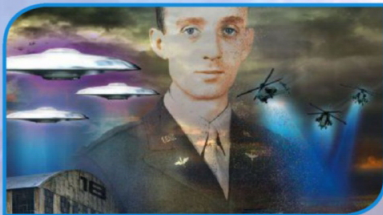
In terms of positives, as mentioned, some of the scenery is beautiful to look at, and there's a nice score to accompany the sombre mood of the picture. The performances are also decent enough, particularly from Gunnidis and Thors as the film's leads, but you just feel as if they're fighting an uphill battle.

If you like uninspired, uneventful, nicely-set films that seem to spend the majority of their time using shaky cam shots of lost Norwegians shouting "hello?", then *Frost* may be for you. For everyone else, there are a lot better movies out there, Renny Harlin's *The Day after Tomorrow* for one.

Extras: Making Of

Andrew Pollard

RATING **++**



## ALIEN CRASH AT ROSWELL

DVD / Cert: Exempt / Director: Phillip Coppens / Screenplay: Phillip Coppens / Starring Phillip Coppens, Jesse Marcel III / Release Date: Out Now

Ever wondered what really happened in the summer of 1947 in Roswell, New Mexico where, legend has it, a UFO crashed-landed, scattering debris and dead rubbery aliens all over the dusty landscape? Conspiracy nuts have been all over this one for more than six decades despite Government assurances that the "UFO debris" was really the remains of a fallen high-

altitude experimental weather and surveillance balloon. Suffice to say that this unspeakably thin, ropey, tacky US TV documentary from 2012 won't shed any new light on the mystery. Frankly you'd be better off going out into the garden and staring at a tree for an hour for a better shot at a decent insight into the weird and wonderful world of the enigma of the Roswell incident.

Wild-haired scientist/loon Phillip Coppens is our host, blundering through the 'story' of the Roswell phenomenon without a script to guide him on his way, interviewing one Jesse Marcel III. This weirdo is a dead-eyed descendant of one of the first US Army officers on the scene who, it's believed by Coppens and, undoubtedly, other people who ought to get out more, actually "handled extra-terrestrial debris with his own hands." And that's about it for cutting-edge factual investigation. The lack of any semblance of structure to the piece means we're left with endless repetition – the Marcel family believe it's true because they actually, you know, handled the debris. Did we mention this?

Coppens doesn't even countenance the possibility that the government explanation might be true; he's just content to tell us that "the Marcel family believe it to be true because they experienced it." It's also amazing to realise, apparently, that we're not alone in the universe. Honestly, we're not. *Alien Crash at Roswell* says so. Archive photographs are

flashed up on the screen without explanation or context and the whole woeeful endeavour is soundtrack by appalling and teeth-grindingly irritating lift muzak and padded out by poorly animated, endless scenes of a UFO flying through space or spinning above the New Mexican desert. We're at an absolute loss to comprehend why anyone thinks this garbage is worthy of a UK DVD release. Has no one considered the planet's dwindling resources? Curiosity might tempt you to investigate whether *Alien Crash at Roswell* is really all that bad – but trust us on this, it just is. Don't bother watching it, just throw it in the air and pretend it's a tiny alien spaceship as it spins over your next door neighbour's fence and crashes into a hedge, never to be seen again. *Alien Crash at Roswell* really is worthless nonsense.

Extras: Trailers

Paul Mount

RATING **+**



## BANSHEE CHAPTER

DVD / Cert: 15 / Director & Screenplay: Blair Erickson / Starring: Katia Winter, Ted Levine, Michael McMillian / Release Date: Out Now

*Banshee Chapter's* intentions are declared even before a single actor appears on screen. A montage of real footage of American officials, among them Bill Clinton, sets out the realities of the MKUltra project that experimented with hallucinogenic materials on human subjects.

The internalising of terror, the loosened grip on reality and the clandestine nature of the project itself make it an irresistible subject for horror movies, especially those such as *Banshee Chapter*, that suggest that even what we do know about the project is just a fraction of the story.

The film follows young journalist Anne (Winter) as she traces the footsteps of her college buddy James (McMillian), who disappeared while conducting a filmed experiment with the synthetic drug, DMT-19. Hooking up with Thomas Blackburn (Levine), a counterculture writer and Hunter S. Thompson in all but name, Anne's journey takes in conspiracy theory, malevolent government agencies, radio signals, extra-dimensional beings and sheer hallucinatory terror. The H.P. Lovecraft story *From Beyond* is a strong influence, pervasive enough to warrant a hand-waving by Blackburn.

The narrative's horror is drawn largely from chemical, psychological and technological sources, while the film's thrills take the form of creeping dread and sudden, emergent jumps. It's a neat way of transferring the horror from the chemically-altered minds of the characters to the viewer. While it places the secret experiments front-and-centre, interpolating gruesome images from them, it also makes light sketches of the wider implications

of the project and of the link between state malevolence and the counterculture that purportedly opposed it.

*Banshee Chapter* is carried well by Winter, whose clipped English accent sounds distinctly odd in the western US setting (while also bringing a welcome sense of precision to the early voice over). Levine clearly had a great time playing Blackburn, serving up several laughs in his portrayal as the bad boy outsider of American letters.

The film was produced on a limited budget and, while this shows, director Blair Erickson makes a virtue of the restriction, cultivating a *mise-en-scène* that is by turns lonely and claustrophobic. The desert setting is an appropriate one, offering a contrast with the close terror of the interior scenes and suggesting that the prying eyes of the public are very far away indeed.

Extras: None

Michael Noble

RATING +++++ B



## DRACULA - THE DARK PRINCE

DVD / Cert: 15 / Director: Peary Reginald Teo / Screenplay: Nicole Jones, Steven Paul, Peary Reginald Teo / Starring: Luke Roberts, Jon Voight / Release Date: Out Now

While there have been countless reinterpretations and reimaginings of the Dracula story over the years, few have exuded quite such a pervading sense of pointlessness as this one.

In the 15th century, Drac (Roberts) successfully repels the invading Turks only to return to find his castle in the grip of an insurrection that culminates in the murder of his wife. After swiftly despatching the assassins, he renounces God and all his works, and for this is cursed to live for eternity as a vampire. Out to a

hundred or so years later, and one Leonardo Van Helsing (Voight), along with two warrior women under his tutelage, hooks up with a wayward young thief and his band of merry outlaws to take the fight to the Dark Prince and his sinister cohorts. A suicide mission, one might think, but they possess the one thing in the world that the vampire lord fears in the form of the Lightbringer – the staff that Cain used to kill Abel in biblical days of yore. And, lo! Not only does it transpire that the young thief is a direct descendant of the

mythical Cain, but that Drac is the descendant of Abel. Erm, hang on a minute...

The above synopsis doesn't even begin to express what complete gibberish the script of this obviously DVD offering is. But it's all in the execution, right? Right. Except the execution of this convoluted mess is flawed on about every possible level one can imagine. With his long, flowing blond locks and *Fighting Fantasy* armour, Luke Roberts seems more of a *Castlevania* conception of Dracula than anything remotely inspired by Stoker's novel. Which maybe wouldn't be such a bad thing if he wasn't about as threatening as Harry Hill, possessing all the dark charisma and sexual magnetism of Alan Partridge. And he doesn't get much to do besides moon around his unrealistic castle, its exteriors represented via the medium of Xbox CGI. Said castle also has, erm, a cloaking device.

Anyone who can manage to get past the first 15 minutes of this will spend the remainder asking 'Why? Why does what is presumably supposed to be 16th

or 17th century Wallachia look like the dark ages? Why would Vlad be the descendant of Abel? Why the hell is John Voight in this? And why did someone think we wanted to see a bad sword-and-sorcery 'prequel' to a classic horror fable?

It's dubious as to whether any of the three (!) writers of this even read Stoker's novel before embarking on this travesty. From the evidence on display their 'research' extended to viewing Coppola's '92 film on DVD, and perhaps only the first ten minutes of that before they started talking shop or arguing over who ate the last Dorito. If you do happen to find yourself fancying a bit of ify S&S (let's face it, we all do sometimes), with stagy sets and the occasional gratuitous flash of T&A, you'd be far better advised to dig out your old copy of *Deathstalker II*.

*Dracula: The Dark Prince* - coming soon to the bargain bin of your local Morrison's.

Extras: None

Rob Talbot

RATING ++ 2





## PARANORMAL XPERIENCE 3D

DVD + BD / Cert: 18 / Director: Sergi Vizcaino / Screenplay: Daniel Padro / Starring: Maxi Iglesias, Amaia Salamanca, Lucho Fernandez / Release Date: February 24th

The words 'Paranormal', 'Xperience' and '3D' do not, normally inspire great confidence. Thankfully, *Paranormal Xperience 3D* is much better than its title suggests. An odd Spanish supernatural slasher film, it packs its five medical students

off for a field trip which none of them will forget in a hurry.

The setting is an abandoned Spanish mining town, rumoured to be haunted, following the crimes of a murderous mad doctor and his subsequent death there. The students' experiment

(Xperiment?) hopes to disprove the existence (Xistence?) of spooks (spoox? Too far?) and the supernatural, but the evidence they find there points so far in the opposite direction as to get them all thoroughly killed... in 3D.

Starburst had envisioned yet another found footage turd, slipping *Paranormal Xperience 3D* into our DVD player, but there's barely a handicap nor snotty nose to be found throughout. In fact, it's closer to a backwoods slasher film than it is a *Paranormal Activity* rip-off. The good doctor makes for a fine villain, while the kids are young and pretty enough that they're decent company until they're inevitably knocked off, one by one. If only they could have spent a little more time paying attention to their surroundings and less trying to hit on one another, they might have survived a little longer. From one character's constant obsession with both tying and being tied up, to the guys' relentless hitting on poor troubled Diana, it's small

wonder that this famous five should find themselves failing their finals.

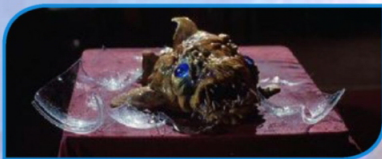
Predictable and clichéd as it may be (does a film's twist still count as a twist if we can see it coming from a mile off?), *Paranormal Xperience* does impress in its gore sequences. Despite being very obviously filmed for 3D (expect to see a lot of fingers, gore and grue thrown at the screen), it's delightfully nasty at times, making good use of the old eyeball piercing, barbed wire garrotting and smashed glass splatter sequences throughout. The CGI blood is no good, and some of the makeup work is a bit icky, but it only adds to the film's charm.

Pleasant surprise, *Paranormal Xperience 3D* is an enjoyable Spanish curiosity which makes up for its lack of originality with guts, gusto and... yes, Xtreme 3D.

**Extras:** None

Joel Harley

**RATING** ★★★★★



## HELLGATE

DVD / Cert: 18 / Director: William A. Levey / Screenplay: Michael O'Rourke / Starring: Ron Palillo, Abigail Wolcott, / Release Date: Out Now

Four college kids on a road trip hear the local legend of the Hellgate Hitchhiker, a young woman named Josie who was killed by a biker gang and whose father resurrected her with a mysterious crystal cluster. Of course, the story turns out to be true, and Josie now haunts the back roads looking for lost travellers, seducing and killing them as they approach the ghost town of Hellgate.

You might think the above description sounds incredibly stupid, but believe us, it's all so much worse. The film starts off with

the story of Josie, giving us a double helping of kitsch with an '80s film recreating the '50s and as much good girl cliché as can be crammed into two minutes of introductory screen time before her tragic death.

The budgetary limitations of the film are seen soon after, with Josie's dad Lucas wandering into a mine and inexplicably discovering a block of quartz glowing like a prop from a Jon Pertwee episode of *Doctor Who* and encountering a rubber ball bouncing on an elastic band. Discovering the crystal's reanimation properties,

he brings his daughter back to life with the side-effect of turning her into a seductive murderess with a penchant for translucent nightdresses and garish eye makeup.

She then takes it upon herself to kill anyone who comes to the town, because the motorbike gang were called "the Strangers" and, y'know, anyone from outside the town is by default a "stranger" and oh, forget it. Hellgate itself is a tourist ghost town - which is apparently a thing - and at night turns into a literal ghost town for no discernible reason.

Poe's Law is an Internet maxim observing that a parody of extremism is difficult to differentiate from the real thing. Similarly, it's sometime hard to tell if a film is satirising the style of bad films or is just plain bad itself, and in *Hellgate*, plot, reason and character development take a back seat to overblown histrionics and WTFery. We have eerie sets overtly backlit by industrial halogens, a seduction even more ham-fisted and unerotic than Gigli's "turkey time" (and set to the ubiquitous love theme from Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* no

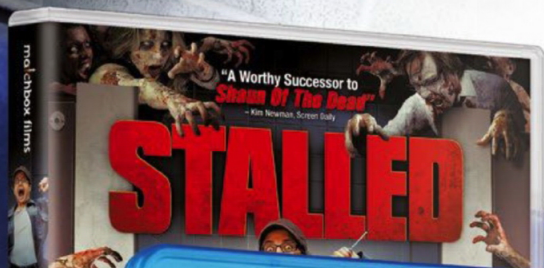
less), present day Lucas appearing as some kind of Old West cyborg, a girl having already sparked up a post-coital cigarette even as she's rolling off her inadequate lover, the most hilariously facial reaction to cunnilingus you're ever likely to see, and a newly crafted makeshift machete lifted triumphantly with all the reverence of Nimue holding aloft Excalibur.

The whole film feels like a feature-length episode of *Garth Marenghi's Darkplace* and should be taken about as seriously. The rating below is something of a compromise; in terms of professional and objective analysis of the film's quality, it's a 2, but if you're a connoisseur of the unintentional comedy value of irredeemably atrocious films, consider it an 8.

**Extras:** Road to Perdition, B-Movie Style / Alien Invasion, Blaxploitation and Ghost-Busting Mayhem / Video Nasty

Andrew Marshall

**RATING** ★★★★★

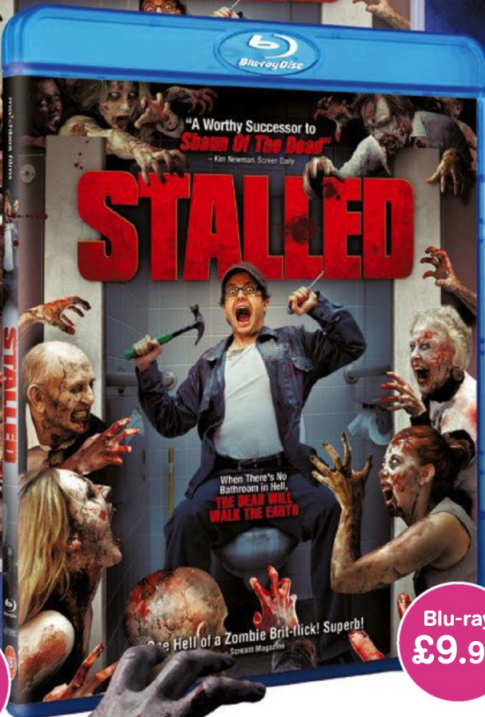


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## BOOK

## WORMHOLE

a monthly pick  
of Genre Fiction  
by Kate Fathers

THE CALCUTTA  
CHROMOSOME  
*a novel of fevers, delirium & discovery*



AMITAV  
GHOSH

Last month I said that *To Say Nothing of the Dog* was the perfect book for anyone uncertain of the kind of fiction they want to read. After finishing *The Calcutta Chromosome*, I'm not so sure.

In an unspecified time in the future, LifeWatch employee Antar is working from his New York home when his Ava system (a kind of semi-sentient computer) comes across the fragment of an ID badge. He discovers that it belonged to someone he once met:

L Murugan, a LifeWatch employee and self-proclaimed expert on Sir Ronald Ross (a 1902 Nobel Prize winner for his work with malaria), who disappeared in Calcutta. From there the novel jumps to the nineteenth century and the 1990s; from Ross's makeshift malaria lab to Murugan's last days in Calcutta; from a tiny railway station in Renpur to journalist Urmila's cramped flat; and the further we readers go, the more we come to understand the true nature of the Calcutta chromosome.

Originally published in 1996 (and winner of the 1997 Arthur C Clarke Award), Amitav Ghosh's novel never truly settles on what it wants to be. Sometimes it's science fiction or a medical thriller; sometimes it's a fantasy, others historical fiction, and once, a horror novel. It's a testament to Ghosh's talent that he makes all of these elements work, and perhaps it's due to his sparse use of each genre. While the core plot concerns Murugan's disappearance and its connection to malaria research, at different points in the novel Ghosh allows the story to incorporate different genre elements without dwelling on them. His use of science fiction is a prime example: the novel begins with sci-fi elements, those being a not-too-distant future and Antar's computer Ava, but much like time travel in a *Doctor Who* episode, sci-fi is largely a plot device used to launch the rest of the action. The other genres are treated similarly: the novel turning to historical fiction when we follow Ronald Ross and into horror during the writer Phulboni's story and into fantasy as more about the chromosome is revealed. Maybe this is why *The Calcutta Chromosome* is simply labelled "fiction": you can't categorise it otherwise.

Ghosh's talent for juggling aside, the novel is very well written. Ghosh uses a light, accessible prose for much of it, deviating only during one of the historical sections (where it takes on a more formal tone) and during Murugan's narrations, which are deeply informal and wonderfully engaging (and often hilarious). Ghosh also does an excellent job of connecting all of his characters, which highlights one of the big themes of the book. Connection is one of the most basic parts of humanity, and one of the fundamentals for our survival. We find connections everywhere: in family and friends and co-workers;

in people of the same gender and sexuality and the same country when we're abroad; in puzzles and theories and ideas. The yearning for connection is what fuels us, and it's the driving force in not only Ghosh's novel itself, but in his characters. Every character and every action is connected in some way; every meeting is impactful and every character is given their time to shine, both in the lives of the people they meet and within the larger framework of the story. It is such a tightly written story, and in fact it's so tightly written that Ghosh *just has* to throw a wrench in the works by bringing up the question of fate versus free will. It's not merely an implication that the characters are connected by something larger and more powerful than themselves, but how far back does that influence go? Have the novel's mysteries been something they have all stumbled across through random happenstance, or have they been guided there? Is the fate of the characters the by-product of chance, or did the cosmos select them from the beginning? Much like in *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, arguments could be made for both sides, and there's something comforting about the novel's ambiguity. After all, Ghosh's characters are ones who suffer, in both small and large ways, and it's heartening to think that it hasn't been for nothing.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is a complex novel, in its ideas and its format and in its scope. But it's a riveting book, intelligent and thought provoking, and it taught me more about malaria than I'd ever hoped to know. As a work of genre it is a welcome deviation from the American and European perspectives that so dominates this area, giving readers an Indian look at speculative fiction. No matter what mood you're in, if you're up for something new, this book is worth a look.





## SHARCANO

Author: Jose Prendes  
 Publisher: Lightning Source UK  
 Release Date: Out Now

We're gonna go out on a limb and guess that your initial thoughts were ones of dread and disbelief that the recent trend of ridiculous shark movies *Super Shark*, *Sharknado*, *Ghost Shark* and *Mega Shark*

vs. *Mecha Shark* has now transcended over to the world of the written word. Whilst you'd be correct in this presumption – the main plot of *Sharcano* does centre on sharks made of molten magma, after all – this completely off-the-wall idea actually works a hell of a lot better in a novel than most of its contemporaries do on screen.

As various events and acts of destruction point to some sort of biblical end for the planet, we find our story tied to cock-sure reporter Mick Cathcart and marine biologist Agnes Brach as they search for answers. Going out on a limb, we can say that the one thing that they didn't expect to find is a volcano that begins to fire out sharks made of molten lava. In an instance of 'tough shit' for them, that's exactly what they come across. With the assistance of a small band of supporting characters, Mick and Agnes have to put a stop to these over-cooked creatures before the whole world is destroyed.

Yes, *Sharcano* definitely has a unique premise but author Jose Prendes, who also happened to pen the script for *Mega Shark vs. Mecha Shark*, delivers a story that is fluid, witty, detailed and an easy read. In some ways, it's impossible not to compare *Sharcano* to those equally odd movies with similar story arcs, but the imagination is a wonderful tool. Whereas a lot of the problem with the low-budget, bizarre shark movies out there revolves around performance and horrendous effects work, *Sharcano's* format removes these issues. It's down to you, faithful reader, to make *Sharcano* work; the story certainly holds

up its part of the bargain.

The first of an apparent 'sharkpocalypse' trilogy – *Sharks of the Living Dead* is up next – *Sharcano* is a surprisingly strong story that makes you give credence to the idea that maybe the fodder that usually ends up as a laughable Syfy movie is far more suited to a novel format. Don't instinctively rush to throw *Sharcano* into the ocean of ludicrously bad shark tales out there, as we're given a story that sees the blood-soaked, descriptive destruction of Peter Benchley meet the charm and humour of Bruce Campbell. Prendes' potentially ridiculous premise delivers a smart, funny, action-filled dip into the fiery depths of hell, balancing well-developed characters, clever plot points, references aplenty and just the right amount of crazy. If this is the start of the sharkpocalypse, consider us happy to be along for the ride.

Andrew Pollard

RATING ★★★★★



## ALIEN: OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Author: Tim Lebbon  
 Publisher: Titan  
 Release Date: Out Now

The *Alien* prequel that isn't *Prometheus*. The first in a brand new trilogy of novels set in the *Alien* universe, Tim Lebbon's *Out of the Shadows* bridges the gap between *Alien* and *Aliens*, with poor Ripley waking up to yet more Xenomorph terror aboard a crashing ship in a decaying orbit above an alien planet.

Did the gap between *Alien* and *Aliens* really need bridging? Not really, but Lebbon does it well enough. As the crew aboard a mining ship happen upon both the eponymous aliens and Ellen Ripley, the stage is set for an entertaining return to the *Alien* universe. With the action skipping from industrial space ships to dusty, alien-infested planets, Lebbon certainly gets the tone and atmosphere right. He handles both the action and the horror well enough, with engineer Hooper emerging as a sympathetic, likeable lead character. The supporting characters are well drawn too; basic archetypes, but easy to like – much like the crew of *Alien* and the marines of *Aliens*. Indeed, Ripley's inclusion is the odd one out, her presence acting like a walking, talking spoiler to the novel's denouement. We know how *Alien* ended and how *Aliens*

begins, so there's always a sense of *Out of the Shadows* having to work towards a very specific endgame.

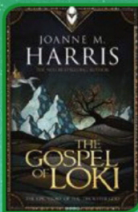
Which is a shame, because it tells an otherwise excellent story – marrying the atmosphere of the first film with the action of its sequels – somewhere between the underrated *Alien 3* and *Resurrection* in terms of quality. Like the latter, its unwillingness to let Ripley go is to the story's detriment (with Hoop's crush on Ripley coming across as particularly unnecessary) but Lebbon writes her well enough. It's exciting, tense and makes for very easy reading. The alien attacks are impressively gory, the futuristic world of *Alien* well-rendered and descriptive.

In spite of its flaws, *Out of the Shadows* is a fine addition to the *Alien* myths. With *Prometheus* taking the franchise away in a different direction, *Out of the Shadows* keeps the old one afloat. With two sequels quickly inbound, this is one tie-in to keep an eye on.

Joel Harley

RATING ★★★★★





## THE GOSPEL OF LOKI

Author: Joanne M. Harris  
Publisher: Gollancz  
Release Date: Out Now

Purporting to be a memoir which even the blurb specifies should be taken with a pinch of salt, this book presents the history of Asgard through the eyes of Loki, the trickster god. From his initial meeting with Odin to Ragnarok itself, *The Gospel of Loki* delves into the "truth" behind Norse mythology.

Much of the fun comes from Loki's irreverent first person perspective. With his side remarks, cocksure attitude and brashness, he's an undeniably entertaining narrator. Even when he is spawning monsters and working to undermine his fellow Asgardians, Harris always finds a way to make the reader root for him.

Running through a vast

number of legends, *The Gospel of Loki* serves up a great number of events for the protagonist to work with. Some directly involve Loki, others do not, but each time there is a unique spin put on the tale. The results are often comical, and while this is not a bad thing in itself, there are moments which would have served the story better had they been played relatively straight-faced. In particular, you feel the lack of a convincing throughline towards Loki's eventual betrayal of Asir and Vanir.

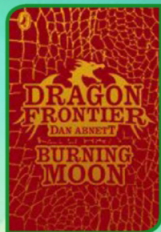
Speaking of the Norse gods, don't expect too much from them. As everything is filtered through Loki's extremely biased point of view, many characters lack complexity. While there

are exceptions such as Odin, the likes of Heimdal, Thor and Baldr are presented as relatively one dimensional brutes/prettys boys. Also, don't expect to ever get used to Loki using modern language as opposed to pseudo-Shakespearian lingo, especially when he resorts to "chillax".

Ultimately, *The Gospel of Loki* is worth it for a good many laughs and an ingeniously skewed retelling of Norse mythology. It's fun and you'll keep going to the end, but you can't help but feel it could have used a few less winks at the audience.

Callum Shephard

RATING



## DRAGON FRONTIER: BURNING MOON

Author: Dan Abnett  
Publisher: Puffin  
Release Date: Out Now

Dan Abnett has a reputation for being highly prolific and extremely flexible. His work in the past includes tie-in fiction for *Doctor Who* and *Warhammer 40K*, dozens of comic books and the odd bit of original fiction here and there. Even though the range is pretty broad, most of the work tends to be on the darker side of things, so it was a slight surprise when it was announced that he was working on a range of books called *Dragon Frontier*, aimed at children aged nine to ninety-nine.

*Dragon Frontier: Burning Moon* is the latest book in the series and picks up where the last one left off. It's the tale of Jake Polson, a young boy trying to survive on the American frontier following a tragic

attack on a wagon train that has separated him from his family. This, however, was no ordinary raid; as you may have been able to surmise from the title, this version of the Wild West features fire-breathing dragons. After the events of the first book, Jake is now a Dragon Rider, taking lessons in the art from the natives. *Burning Moon* delves deeper into this world, and gives us strong glimpses into where the dragons are from.

Abnett skilfully blends high concept fantasy into the grittiness of the Wild West, without making things too dark. There's plenty of action and the characters are nice. As this book is aimed squarely at younger readers do not expect overly complex characterisation; the

bad guys are dumb and greedy, the father figures are gruff and fatherly and the bratty yet brave friend is amusing and annoying in equal measure.

Despite being the second part of an ongoing series, *Burning Moon* keeps a consistent pace throughout and has an enjoyable beginning, middle and end. That said, it does suffer somewhat from being only part of a greater whole; you really need to have read the first book. Adult readers will find this a very relaxing and easy read, whilst younger types are unlikely to have encountered anything quite like this before and should be in for a treat.

Ed Fortune

RATING



## TWENTY TRILLION LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

Author: Adam Roberts  
Publisher: Gollancz  
Release Date: Out Now

As you might expect from the title, *Twenty Trillion Leagues Under the Sea* is a tribute of sorts to Jules Verne's classic tale, but one that takes a rapid and unexpected turn pretty early on.

Set in a post-World War II France, Captain Adam Cloche and his hand-picked crew are tasked with testing out an brand new nuclear-powered submarine. Along for the ride is a chap called Lebre, who may or may not be some sort of shadowy secret agent, and two Indian scientists who have been added to the roster in order to keep an eye on the nuclear energy. Early on, we're given the first of many twists; a government report tells the reader that the ship vanished, all

hands lost. As the story unfolds, we discover that the submarine is rapidly sinking and has (quite improbably) sunk further than it is physically possible to do.

The way the crew deals with this bizarre catastrophe sets the narrative up nicely for a sequence of disasters and survival stories. The claustrophobic atmosphere, the rampant paranoia and the inevitable madness are all part of a cleverly woven tale of how someone might cope when matters get truly bizarre. *Twenty Trillion Leagues Under the Sea* is stuffed full of impossible things from improbable wonders to chthonic horrors that would give many nightmare creatures reason to pause.

Though the characters are

interesting and the whole thing enjoyable, Roberts' tale does suffer from trying to be a bit sharper and smarter than it needs to be. From the subtle hints at the start that the world is not quite what it should be to the very strange sequences toward the end, it often crosses the line between wonder and confusing nonsense, but in the end balances out. Roberts shines when telling impossible tales in a way that even the greatest of sceptics will believe, and this is one that will have you pondering for weeks after you've completed the book.

Ed Fortune

RATING



## View from THE WATCHTOWER

Joel Harley pulls Monitor Duty to bring you the latest news from the mainstream...



**Welcome, gentle readers, to another exciting instalment of View from the Watchtower, as I bring you the latest in mainstream (and occasionally not-so mainstream) funnybook news from the frontline. It's still early days for 2014, but there's already much to get excited about...**

Our most exciting story this month started as a rumour – a rumbling down the grapevine that John Romita Jr. is coming to DC comics. Romita is best known for his work at Marvel – and, recently, on Mark Millar's *Kick-Ass* – with only the odd bit of artwork and a (fantastic) Batman/Punisher crossover to keep DC fans happy. Well, it has been revealed that Romita is indeed coming to DC comics. And not just any old DC comic, either. He and Geoff Johns will be headlining *Superman* this summer. This great news has been accompanied by a saliva-inducing piece of art from the comics superstar,

depicting Superman's new look. If anyone can make the Man of Steel's natty New DC threads look good, it's John Romita Jr. While we're on the subject, if you haven't read it already, do seek out *Punisher/Batman*, if only for a panel in which Bats casually dismisses the Punisher without laying so much as a single punch.

Talking of Batman (as I do, very often): we've seen the Dark Knight's first encounter with his most mortal enemy many times, but Max Landis (*Chronicle* screenwriter and son of director John Landis) treads fresher ground in his *Adventures of Superman* story *The Sound*

*of One Hand Clapping*. Here, Superman meets the Clown Prince of Crime for the first time, in a tale written by Landis and illustrated by one-name artist Jock. *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* is available in all good comics stores now.

There's more potentially good news in the return of a certain Flash to the DC Universe. That's right, after much clamouring by fans, Wally West is finally set to speed on back into this reality. Wally will return in this April's *Flash* #30, written by Robert Vendetti and Van Jensen, illustrated by Brett Booth. The exact circumstances remain to be seen, but Flash

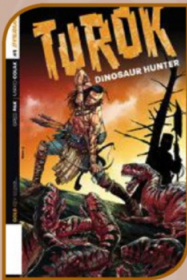
fanboys should be cheered to have the scarlet speedster back in action.

In slightly more surprising news from the DC Universe, it has been revealed that public joke Aquaman is set to score himself a second ongoing series – a team book featuring his Atlantean chums, *The Others*. In *Aquaman and the Others*, the King of Atlantis will defend Atlantean artefacts from various (no doubt water based) threats.

Across Universes, as we so often travel, to the fine denizens of Marvel. In news that will surprise absolutely no-one, Peter Parker is set to return from the dead (no, really) just in time for the next big thing: Goblin War. Its title may sound like something you can get for free from the App Store, but it should have at least one Green Goblin and one Hobgoblin battling it out for Gobby supremacy, just as the character celebrates his 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Where does that leave Doc Ock's Superior Spider-man, who proved to be surprisingly popular in Pete's absence? We're not sure, but we can at least hope that Marvel have more sense than to immediately undo all of Ock's recent character development by making him (properly) evil again, or simply forget all of his experiences as Superior Spidey. And remember, Doc, if Mephisto might happen to offer you any sort of deal, *just say no*.

Elsewhere, we find the *Marvel Now* project in full force, with the Punisher relaunched to his new stomping ground in Los Angeles (spoiler: he took his guns with him) and Logan, minus his healing factor, in *Wolverine* #1. Ms. Marvel is proving to be very popular in her own re-launched title, while we find many other heroes wrapping up their own





in preparation for the same.

Finally, we skip from the Big Two to the relatively smaller presses, for more exciting news. There's less superheroes, sure, but plenty of familiar names and faces. One very familiar name is James O' Barr's *The Crow*. Offering another poor soul a shot at revenge, *The Crow* is set to return this March in IDW comics' *The Crow: Pestilence*. A boxer and his family, after he fails to take a dive in an all-important fight, are murdered by angry mobsters. One year later, he is resurrected to take revenge upon those who wronged him and his family. It's the standard Crow shtick with

an interesting Mexican twist, some punky designs (loving the Mohican) and great art.

There's more revenge at play in Jonathan Ross's aptly titled *Revenge*, a six-issue miniseries starting February 26<sup>th</sup>. When washed up action man Griffin Franks finally hits big with his movie 'The Revenge', he thinks he's finally lucked out. Not so, as he is brutally attacked and defaced by a figure from his past out for revenge. But, surviving the attack, Franks winds up being the one seeking revenge on his revenger. With film fan and telly personality Ross doing the witing – sorry, *writing* – we can expect a gruesome action thriller

with a blackly humorous streak and well versed in film lore.

Another familiar name getting an all-new series is *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*, available from Dynamite Comics now. The ongoing series has Greg Pak eschewing Batman and Superman in favour of Native Americans and Native Earthlings (dinosaurs), and Mirko Colak on art duties. A colourful, action-packed tale full of dinosaurs and Indians (plus an ace variant cover from Jae Lee), it's well worth picking up. "Jurassic Park!" as a great man once excitedly proclaimed.

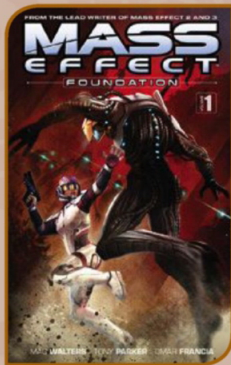
One great man no stranger to excitedly proclaiming things

is Doctor Who – sorry, the Doctor – set for a new series with Titan Comics. The Tenth, Eleventh and upcoming Twelfth Doctor all on the slate for new stories from Titan, the license having moved across from IDW. No sign of Eccleston so far, though. No change there (insert regeneration pun here, if you like). How distribution in the UK is going to work remains to be seen, as Panini Comics currently hold all the UK rights to *Doctor Who*. Titan being a British company, however, we'd imagine they have something up their sleeve. A sonic screwdriver, perhaps.

And finally, in anything but lighter news, there's the announcement that Grant Morrison and Chris Burnham are to re-team for creator owned horror comic *Nameless*. It's described as the "ultimate horror comic", which sounds about right for the team who traumatised BatFans everywhere with their murder of Damien Wayne. Published by Image, the six-issue miniseries is to come later in 2014. Artist Burnham promised Comic Book Resources a "straight up, balls-to-the-wall horror book. 11 year old kids will steal it, and it'll ruin their lives forever." Can't wait.

As ever, I can be tweeted or e-mailed with any comicbook news, gossip or recommendations. Be gentle, though. There's only so much excitement one man can handle.

Joel Harley can be contacted at:  
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and tweeted @joelharley



## MASS EFFECT: FOUNDATION VOLUME 1

Writer: Mac Walters  
Artist: Tony Parker  
Publisher: Dark Horse  
Release Date: Out Now

The appeal of the *Mass Effect* series lies in its setting. The video game (that has inspired the franchise) is set in a rich and deep world, one that has created a large and extremely dedicated following. Though the games are fun to play, storytelling is the key selling point of the series and this means that any related *Mass Effect* fiction cannot afford to slack in any way.

Dark Horse, who are no strangers to getting an adaptation spot on, have drafted in original *Mass Effect* creator Mac Walters to create a prequel of sorts to the video games. Given how interesting the characters are in the source material, the stories do seem to almost write themselves. What we have here is a collection of nice little preludes; Walter's talent for creating engaging heroes is obvious, and all of the stories fit the universe perfectly. Sadly it does not really explore the broader world, and as that's one of the great appeals of the franchise, *Mass Effect: Foundation Volume 1* is sorely lacking.

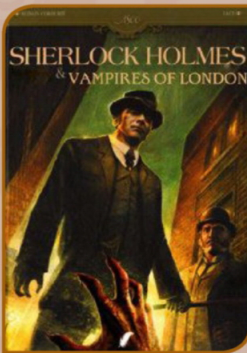
Even worse, the pacing is completely off. Though it attempts to tell a multi-tier story with various prequel sequences slotting into the broader narrative, this means that the narrative lacks coherence. This is made worse by an assumption that the reader is very familiar with the finer

points of the first *Mass Effect* game. Some of the scenes are brilliant if you know quite why they're meant to matter so much (especially the opening story), but casual readers are left lost. If you don't know the game, you don't care about the characters and that leaves the entire thing a bit flat.

Tony Parker's art is a little bit bland, which is an unexpected disappointment. Though he does a decent job at mimicking the world of the game, the art lacks the attention to detail that makes *Mass Effect* so memorable. As a result, many of the pages are a lot more static and dull than they really should be, and though this does not detract from the story, it doesn't add to it either. The action sequences are messily handled, and neither the script or the art seems to capture the cinematic scale that *Mass Effect* adventures are famous for. As a generic science fiction graphic novel, this would be average and bland. As an addition to a broad and popular narrative, it's a shameful waste. In addition, this is only Volume 1, so, much like its inspiration, it doesn't really end properly. The die-hard fans will lap this up, but everyone else will be left in the cold.

Ed Fortune

RATING ★★★★★



## SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE VAMPIRES OF LONDON

Writer: Sylvain Cordurie  
Artist: Laci  
Publisher: Dark Horse  
Release Date: Out Now

Given the recent rise in interest of all things Sherlock, it should come as no surprise that a graphic novel called *Sherlock Holmes and the Vampires of London* should come along. The book does exactly what it says on the tin, putting 221b's finest against blood-sucking monsters. When the Master Vampire of London comes to Holmes looking for assistance in catching and destroying a vampire-killing relative of Queen Victoria, you know that it's going to be the sort of adventure that keeps piling on the absurdity until the reader has a big grin on their face.

The Reichenbach Falls is an interesting part of the *Sherlock Holmes* mythos, because it creates a sizeable gap in the chronology of the *Holmes* adventures that allows all sorts of nonsense to be slotted in by modern writers. This is the trick that *Sherlock Holmes and the Vampires of London* pulls at the very beginning, neatly ditching Doctor Watson and allowing the good detective to get on with the important work of chinning the undead. This does make the narrative a little problematic at times; without Watson, Holmes has no one to show off to. This means that all the cleverness comes from various reveals throughout, with the result that the characterisation is a little bit stilted. Given that Holmes is such a well-known character however,

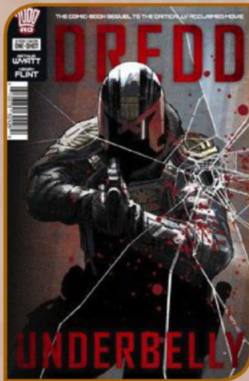
this hardly matters. It also means that this graphic novel is quite explicit with its violence. Nothing overly gross, just lots of things getting killed or exploding, which lends the book more of a Hammer Horror vibe than perhaps intended.

The art is firmly in the European comic book style, highly detailed and realistic-looking, with exaggeration only applied to add to the impact. Laci does seem to only draw one expression for Holmes throughout the story (that of vague disgust) but that works for the tale. A shame though that the colour palette is slightly overly grubby – yes, this is a Victorian adventure, but that's no excuse for making every single panel brown. *Sherlock Holmes and the Vampires of London* is an atmospheric and quick little tale. The main characters are dealt with appropriately and with respect and though the addition of the supernatural seems a little odd at first, the way that Holmes takes it all in his stride seems entirely fitting and works well. Overall, this is a fun book and if you fancy a bit of supernatural Victorian detective adventure, then this will do quite nicely.

Ed Fortune

RATING ★★★★★





## DREDD: UNDERBELLY

Writer: Arthur Wyatt  
Artist: Henry Flint  
Publisher: 2000AD  
Release Date: Out Now

No, there's still no sign of a sequel to the Karl Urban adaptation of 2012. Still, consolation has arrived: the universe finally gets an update with this tie-in, scripted by Arthur Wyatt and illustrated by 2000AD veteran Henry Flint. Following the events of *Dredd*, *Underbelly* sees the perpetually grumpy Judge Joe Dredd still hard at work bringing justice to the streets of Mega-City One.

As with the film, the action is pared down and localised to a relatively small area of the Big Meg. The story concerned with petty criminals, drug deals and illegal immigration. No Dark Judges, Angel Gang or Judge Cal – the influence of Ma-Ma is writ large throughout *Underbelly*, the underworld attempting to fill the void left in her absence. Like the film, it's more realistic, gritty and a whole lot dingier. That means extra swearing, to you and us.

Just as before, the potty-mouth sits ill at ease with the source material, an attempt at extra grit where none was required. Humourless and largely without colour, it's like a regular *Judge Dredd* comic, only without the sense of wit and satire. While that worked for the big screen, it's not quite as effective in the comic book medium, where we already have a perfectly iconic Dredd. It's like a Marvel MAX comic, except the Judge was already pretty 'MAX' to begin with. To complicate

matters, there's also the existence of IDW's relatively faithful take on the character, providing a serviceable alternative to 2000AD *Dredd*. While *Dredd* was an excellent comic book adaptation, this reverse tie-in feels somewhat redundant and lifeless; low budget and scaled back where it doesn't need to be.

That said, *Underbelly* does have its virtues. Flint's art is as great as ever, the artist being one of the definitive *Dredd* creators along with Carlos Ezquerro and Brian Bolland (not to mention the many, many other wonderful artists at 2000AD). It's a quick read, with decent action and some nice interactions between Dredd and Anderson. The comic comes scattered with information on the *Dredd* sequel campaign and advertisements for Old Stoney Face's regular adventures in 2000AD and *The Complete Case Files*. As an exercise in brand awareness, it does its job very well. Sequel, please. Soon?

This version of *Dredd* could work as an on-going series or graphic novel, but to do that, it really has to embrace the universe and feel free to do its own thing, as Garth Ennis did with the *Punisher*. *Underbelly* is a sweet thought and a good idea, but Dredd deserves better.

Joel Harley

RATING ★★★★★ 7



## ANT COLONY

Writer: Michael DeForge  
Artist: Michael DeForge  
Publisher: Drawn and Quarterly  
Release Date: Out Now

Ever wondered what it's like to live in an ant colony? Of course you haven't, you're a sane, rational person with a wealth of distractions mere finger clicks away. Cartoonist Michael DeForge however, has imagined it to be a place similar to a seedy underground sex dungeon. One which sees horny insects fuel up on the stench of ant corpse as an aphrodisiac, before lining up in an orderly queue to satisfy their scarily well endowed Queen. Interest piqued? Then prepare to meet your new favourite graphic novel.

*Ant Colony* is the latest comic delight from Michael DeForge, an artist whose contributions as a designer to the hit TV series *Adventure Time* has created a platform for his independent works, leading him to be touted as the next prominent voice in the realm of alternative comics. With this latest work he looks set to justify these claims, injecting the frenzied spirit of *Adventure Time* inside an adult and outrageously comical story. His minimal, yet striking art style reveals an ant colony in gradual decline as it struggles to contend with the perilous world above.

The entire book is drenched in a surreal psychedelic haze, with trippy visual designs like the vehicular centipedes and hound-faced spiders feeling right at home against the abstract colour palette. The central characters are just as wonderfully bizarre, with twisted

ant cops and paranoid younglings riffing on other comic book and movie genre tropes in both funny and unsettling ways. Once you've finished *Ant Colony*, don't be surprised if you find yourself keeping a worried eye out for earthworms on your next stroll in the great outdoors.

As for the book's visuals, the fantastic cartoon art on display in *Ant Colony* will have you constantly looking back through its pages. Each panel pops, revelling in its distasteful nature, with imaginative drawings and some stunningly gruesome one page spreads. Particular standouts are the Queen's creepy human-like design and a vivid battle scene with the red ants, where decapitations and dismembered limbs are the order of the day.

Like most comics that celebrate the excessively unusual, *Ant Colony* will perhaps only appeal to a certain anarchic mindset. If you find yourself frowning at the idea of sex-crazy ants taking part in wars, personal relationships and surprisingly bleak narratives, then you probably won't find much joy here. But if you thrive on the weird and wonderful, DeForge's *Ant Colony* is an unmissable celebration of the dark and unique.

Adam Starkey

RATING ★★★★★ 9

# PIXEL JUICE

News and  
Previews  
in Gaming by  
Lee Price



## The Good – Cheaper Xbox One on the Way

This was quick. One of those pesky unnamed sources doing the rounds is claiming that Microsoft have plans to release a cheaper model of their new Xbox One console later in the year. The new model will apparently sell for less than the current one but that's all that anybody knows at the moment.

The rumour mill is also suggesting that the new version could be discless, as recent leaks by yet more unnamed sources seem to back the theory. Whatever happens, cheaper consoles is always a good thing for gamers, especially those who haven't been able to jump onto the next-generation bandwagon just yet. Expect a similar 'leak' from the Sony camp at some point in the near future.

## The Bad – Hope Runs Out for *Star Wars 1313*

There was uproar when Disney picked up the *Star Wars* license and revealed they wouldn't be working on the hotly anticipated *Star Wars 1313*. The game has been on life support ever since, with

diehard fans holding onto hope that Disney may see the error of their ways.

Unfortunately that day will not be coming. Disney has allowed the copyright on the name to run out, pretty much guaranteeing that gamers will not be getting their hands on one of the titles they really wanted before LucasArts closed its doors.

Disney will hopefully resist the urge to create tons of average *Star Wars* games, aimed at relieving the younger fan base from their cash, and develop a title that may actually appeal to adults. Surely there is a market for something aimed at the millions who grew up on the films?

## The Ugly – Research Shows Violent Videogames Decrease Maturity

In a climate that is seemingly determined to find a link between violent videogames and real-life violence, it shouldn't really be considered odd that yet more 'evidence' is coming to light. However that's exactly what's happening. Again.

Research carried out at Brock University in Canada claims that there is a "significant negative relationship" between playing violent videogames and the development of

sociomoral maturity levels in teenagers.

The study took in 100 grade eight students from seven different schools and used something called a Sociomoral Reflection Measure to demonstrate the point they were trying to make.

Time spent playing the game was apparently not much of a factor, which basically means any teenager playing violent videogames is not developing as the researchers say they should. Despite previous 'evidence' claiming that playing games for longer is a direct factor in affecting the social experiences of kids. This doesn't in any way ignore the fact that some kids are less social than others and many of those who are less social will likely spend their time on other activities. Such as playing videogames.

The attempt to claim that time spent on the game has little relevance smacks just a little of yet another attempt to justify findings. But it's surely a good idea to attach a stigma to gamers and the less sociable because everybody in society should be exactly the same.

## The Odd – *Resident Evil* Composer Commissioned Work from Someone Else

Mamoru Samuragouchi, who some may know as the composer of music featured in



the *Resident Evil* and *Onimusha* games, has admitted hiring somebody else to produce his work for almost twenty years.

His lawyer claims, "I've been told that there are certain circumstances that make it hard for the person (who composed the works) to come out in public, and Samuragouchi has come to describe himself as the sole composer."

The composer, who has struggled with hearing issues for most of his life, was one of the most revered in Japan and was especially known for the Hiroshima Symphony, which was apparently written by the unknown composer, despite claiming that his loss of hearing was a gift from God that allowed him to create better compositions.

His record company have announced that they will stop shipping his music and a planned concert tour has been cancelled. Nobody knows who the other composer is or what circumstances have prevented him from making his name public, but it is still pretty damned awful of someone to claim two decades worth of creative work, alongside all the accolades that go with it, only to actually be lying about his contributions.

## The Rest - Mario Comes to McDonalds

This one is odd partly because it smacks of desperation from Nintendo and partly because it is a long time since Nintendo have worked with McDonalds. With the Wii U struggling, it is clear that Nintendo need to do something to pull people back towards the console. To do this they have plumped for offering toys in Happy Meals.

First for the time issue. The last time Nintendo teamed up with Maccie D's was way back in 1989 with a line of toys for *Super Mario Bros 3*. It has taken the company about 25 years to work with the company again and there are likely a bunch of reasons for that.

Which brings us to the desperation. In the UK and US the 'obesity epidemic' is big news, with fast food companies especially under the microscope for their advertising towards kids. My gut instinct is that this is one of the reasons Nintendo has avoided working with them for so long, even if it is clear that doing so often works to some degree. However, in this case I really don't see how this deal helps Nintendo. There isn't much uptake for their console as a whole and their real problem is that more mature gamers are rejecting it and the games on offer for the Xbox One and PS4. Is this really going to inspire an upsurge in Wii U activity? I reckon this is going to be little more than an expensive waste of money for the Big N and could even colour them a little negatively in the eyes of the increasingly health conscious nation.

Still, it's going to be pretty damned



weird to see *Mario* toys coming out of a Happy Meal after so long.

## Disney Pulls Out the Stops with Infinity

Well if you have the tools you may as well use them! A source from somewhere inside Disney has claimed that the company will soon be bringing characters from the *Star Wars* and *Marvel* universes to its online sandbox.

The source commented, "New versions of *Infinity* featuring characters from Disney's *Marvel* superhero unit and the *Star Wars* universe it acquired along with *Lucasfilm* in 2012 are being developed."

At the moment it is unknown whether or not this means new *Infinity* games are an expansion of the current *Infinity*, however the possibility of creating your own stories with such a rich and varied cast of characters, on top of the Disney universe, can only be an attractive prospect.

## The Last of Us Wins Writers Award

Naughty Dog's superb *The Last of Us* has been further recognised with an award from the Writer's Guild of America. The title picked up the 'Outstanding Achievement in Video Game Writing' award, following on from Naughty Dog's previous successes with the last two *Uncharted* games. It's a well-deserved award as well. For my money, *The Last of Us* is one of the top games of this generation and everybody with access to a PS3 should play it.

## Emulation on its way for PS4

Eurogamer is reporting that the PlayStation 4 could see the release of emulators that would allow gamers to play PS1 and PS2 titles. This will apparently not extend to PS3 titles, due to Sony being quite happy

with the streaming service they have in place, but it is great news for gamers who crave some backwards compatibility.

Apparently the emulator will somehow optimise the games for HD resolutions, which would get rid of a lot of blurriness issues that fans had with playing them on the PS3. Good news all round really.

## The Duke Returns?

I really don't know if this is good news or not. Anyway, speculation abounds that *Duke Nukem* may be returning fairly soon (as in within this decade) following Interceptor Entertainment's release of a promo shot of a packet of Kick Ass bubblegum that was accompanied by a scrambled message.

Apparently a Reddit user figured the message out, claiming it said "The King makes his next-generation debut in Duke Nukem: Mass Destruction. A top-down action roleplaying game for PC and PlayStation. Duke Nukem kicks ass across planets in an Unreal Engine-powered galactic adventure to save the president from an apocalyptic alien threat."

A top-down action roleplaying game? Really? The Duke could barely manage his traditional shooting in the forever delayed *Forever!* Why on Earth would a top-down title seem like a good idea?



## THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE (PC, MAC)

APR 4<sup>TH</sup>

This is the big one this month. Many a gamer has been clamouring for the day when the *Elder Scrolls* series would tackle the might of *World of Warcraft* in the MMORPG genre. Now that day is finally upon us and, if you ask me, the *Elder Scrolls* really should be the next step in MMORPGs. As a series it is so much better than *WoW*, but Bethesda really need to pull their finger out to minimise issues and ensure the game provides a valid alternative.

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## LEGO: THE HOBBIT (360)

APR 6<sup>TH</sup>

Another month another LEGO game. Generally speaking you can pretty much guarantee a decent quality outing, albeit a quite easy one. *The Hobbit* also provides plenty of material to craft a game around, assuming the game doesn't go the Peter Jackson route. There's only so much walking and singing you could stuff into a videogame before you realise it's just filler after all. The game will be fun but likely forgettable in the myriad of other LEGO games out there.

CONCEPTION II: CHILDREN OF THE SEVEN STARS (3DS, VITA) - APR 15<sup>TH</sup>

Now this one looks interesting. Regular readers will know I have a soft spot for JRPGs, though admittedly I missed the first in the *Conception* series. By all accounts the game plays a little like the *Persona* series, which is no bad thing at all. It was also the fifth highest selling Vita game on release in Japan, so it has that going for it. One for the JRPG nut for sure.



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## RAVEN'S CRY (PC, 360, PS3)

MAY 7<sup>TH</sup>

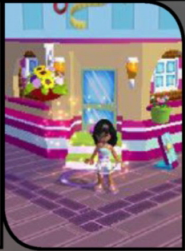
After *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag* did such a good job of being like every other *Assassin's Creed* game BUT WITH PIRATES, it could be argued that there is little space in the market for a swashbuckling title. *Raven's Cry* begs to differ though, and it sounds like an interesting prospect. The story will mix fictional characters with historic figures from the 17th century Caribbean, with the game playing against the family friendly image of pirates and displaying them as the vicious looters they really were. One to keep an eye on.

## DEMON GAZE (VITA)

APR 22<sup>ND</sup>

And you thought the day of the traditional dungeon crawler had come and gone! *Demon Gaze* harkens back to the days when sloggng your way through a dungeon, murdering monster after monster, was the height of RPG gaming. Players will split their time between the dungeons and nearby inns, where they will be able to develop relationships with other characters and spend their booty. *Demon Gaze* has done well in Japan so it may well be worth checking out when it comes to our shores.

## LEGO FRIENDS (DS)

APR 22<sup>ND</sup>

Yet more bloody LEGO games! How these things have not saturated the market yet I will never know. The title will be based on the LEGO sets that bear the same name and is very much aimed at the female side of the market. The game looks really boring, but frankly there isn't a whole lot to get excited about this month so it gets a few column inches.





## ISLAND OF THE LIZARD KING

Author: Ian Livingstone  
 Publisher: Tin Man Games  
 Platform: iOS, Android  
 Release Date: Out Now

Tin Man Games have been steadily going through the Fighting Fantasy catalogue of adventure game books, picking out the ones that are most fondly regarded or remembered. It's quite a long list and it's no small feat converting paper and ink adventure games into handy apps for smartphones. Though books that require the reader to choose the next paragraph to read are still around, they hit the height of their popular market appeal in the '80s, and it's nice to see that they're getting a new lease of life through new technology. The latest conversion is *Island of the Lizard King*.

The plot sees the player on a quest to free some slaves from the tyranny of an evil lizard man, who is building up an army of darkness on the backs of dwarves and men. Mostly, you run about the island, trying to avoid the deadly flora and beating up the murderous fauna. Challenge-wise, it gets the balance between action adventure and problem solving about right, relying mostly on the player's wits rather than demanding that the reader re-do one passage or another.

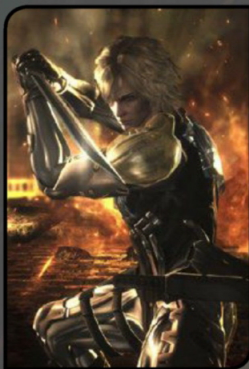
Of all of the conversions done so far, *Island of the Lizard King* is one of those games that players of the original will want to go back to, because they're likely to have a lot of fond memories of playing it back in the day. The paragraph that follows the final battle in this adventure has become a shibboleth of sorts for fans of adventure

game books. Without spoiling it, there is a line that sums up everything that is good about the incredibly engaging geeky fun that these books evoke, and seeing this passage on an iPhone (or Android device) is just as pleasing as it is on the page. Seeing it also means you're about to win the game, or not as the case may be.

The usual features that we've come to expect from Tin Man are present. You can set the game to role virtual dice (which you can knock and fudge like real dice, but only so much), play the adventure in easy mode (by pretty much ignoring the rules and turning to pages you have not earned the right to go to) and set various bookmarks so you can start the game again from previous points. This means you can play the game anyway you fancy and Tin Man have wisely not changed a thing about it. The 'achievements' function (which rewards you for various actions) is still as superfluous as ever, though there is a guilty pleasure to be had from seeing an award pop up when you do certain things. (This writer's favourite has to be The Burninator, an award you get for being a horrible person.) All in all, fun for old gamers and a great introduction for gamers-yet-to-be.

Ed Fortune

RATING



## METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE

Developer: Platinum Games  
 Publisher: Konami  
 Platform: PS3, Xbox 360, PC  
 Release Date: Out Now

Ever since witnessing Cyborg Ninja painting hallways crimson with the blood of guards back in 1998, a good number of *Metal Gear Solid* fans have dreamed, "I wish we could be doing that!" Well, Kojima has answered that dream and it's every bit as grossly entertaining as you'd think.

Several years following the events of *Guns of the Patriots* and the collapse of the war economy, Raiden is working as part of a security detail. When he and his comrades are attacked by remnants of old PMCs engaging in terrorist activities, Raiden goes after them and realises there are far more than just renegades at work here. Mostly though, this is an excuse to cut things up.

Utilising an extremely fast moving and very fluid combat system, *Revengeance* leaves other spectacle fighters like the *Devil May Cry* reboot in the dust. From being able to sprint up rockets fired from a helicopter so as to attack the pilot to going solo against a Metal Gear RAY, the game pulls off every over the top anime scene imaginable. It delivers on that entirely and pulls off some of the most entertaining boss battles of the last generation.

The gimmick here is the sword gameplay which has you entering bullet time and delivering precise cuts on any foes nearby. Everything from the health system to targeting weak points makes full use of this, and unlike other titles there's a great degree

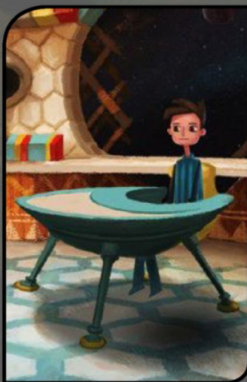
of immersion to be found with it. It's less relentlessly button bashing than it is making careful, rapid strikes which allow you to cut through enemies and scenery alike. Enemies react more to your strikes than other titles and you can see the damage rather than just watching a health bar dropping with each hit.

The game is hardly without its blemishes. The PC port is solid but is unable to make better use of the greater power available and has issues which are still being worked out, including one especially nasty one for Steam. Beyond PC specific problems, *Revengeance* embraces its power fantasy elements making it hard for you to die on the easier difficulty settings, but the higher settings are made near impossible thanks to one particular boss, and the story is a tripe in comparison to other *Metal Gear* titles. Yes, you read that correctly. The nonsense present here almost achieves *Neon Genesis Evangelion* levels of poor storytelling and simplistic ideas dressed up as complex navel gazing. Though at least there's the occasional sign of self-awareness.

Really, if you want to suplex attack mecha and slice up cyborgs into chunky salsa, *Revengeance* is highly recommended. If you want something with substance which isn't skin deep, look elsewhere.

Callum Shepherd

RATING



## BROKEN AGE: PART 1

Developer: Double Fine  
Publisher: Digital Distribution  
Platform: Android, iOS, Linux, OS X, PC  
Release Date: Out Now

Just a couple of months shy of two years since being funded on Kickstarter, *Broken Age* has finally arrived. The masterwork of Tim Schafer of *Psychonauts* fame and Double Fine Productions, this is to be their glorious return to the point-and-click genre. Thankfully, *Part 1* lives up to the hype.

The story follows two characters, Vella and Shay, living very different lives but each seeking in their own way to break with tradition. Vella is living on a world ravaged by a monstrous creature which can only be tamed through human sacrifice and is considering how to end the cycle of human offerings once and for all. Shay meanwhile is told he is the last of his kind and his life is dictated by his spacecraft's overbearing computer. Neither situation is quite as simple as it first seems.

The most striking aspect of the title from the very start is the stylishness with which the game is brought to life. There is something extremely story book-esque about each location's visual appearance, from the dull azure tones of Shay's home to the golden colour which dominates Vella's world. It's a unique kind of charm rarely seen these days and the imagery here carries over into the tale itself. From the voice acting to the humour, everything has a well-developed quality to it you would expect to find if LucasArts were to come

back and create a point-and-click adventure for this day and age.

On a thematic level, issues of responsibility and choice give the title a notable coherence, but at the same time there is plenty of variety of gameplay. While Shay's story involves more interactive gameplay elements, Vella's tends more towards riddle-solving and analysing certain details. It's a subtle element you won't realise is there at first and it's well hidden behind the game's beauty and sense of humour.

If there is one thing to criticise, it's that the game shares the usual problems of point-and-click titles. With only a bare minimum of hand-holding you'll quite often feel rudderless, endlessly backtracking and trying to figure out what on earth you're supposed to do next, or being blindsided by the seamless transitions between gameplay and cutscenes. Honestly though, these are failings which just come with the territory, and they help make your every victory that much more satisfying.

If you've been at all curious to see what the hype is about or desperate for a truly great point-and-click title, go after this one without hesitation. Just keep in mind that this is only *Part 1* of the tale.

Callum Shephard

RATING 



## SURVIVAL HORROR TABLETOP GAME

Developer: Adam Steel  
Art: Adam Steel  
Publisher: DarkMook Miniatures  
Release Date: Out Now

Tabletop gaming can be a very expensive enterprise. Your typical tactical wargame consists of a large box packed with models, rules and counters and tends to cost about the same as a two or three newly released video games. Such an enterprise can make it difficult for the smaller games companies to get much of a foothold, because all of that costs a lot of cash to set up and it also puts off the more casual gamer. Luckily there is a way smaller firms can write great games and at the same time offer these things for pocket money prices.

The rather generic sounding *Survival Horror Tabletop Game* is a print and play game (though it's also available in a handy pre-printed form with the printable files on a CD). This means that all the pieces come on a handy sheet of paper that you have to cut out and glue together yourself. This process is still faster than it would take to assemble all the models in a typical wargaming boxed-set and has the handy advantage that if you lose or break one of the pieces then you can always print them out again.

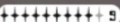
Gameplay is quite straight forward and the rules are either simple and unambiguous. Players either take the role of survivors or the zombie horde and have to proceed through an monster-infested police station in order to find the keys to their salvation. Each game board is

randomly generated as players draw maps tiles to place on the board as they run from room to room, scouring the area for useful items and an escape route. Movement is based on Activity Points; you spend these to fight, open doors and run away. The more your survivor gets injured the more activity points you lose, so the game gets harder the more fights you get into.

Strategic elements include picking which room to go into and working out exactly what sort of kit you need. Additional players make this even more complex as you need to balance out hogging all the goodies (such as med-packs and armour) with the likelihood that your fellow adventurers will survive the zombie hordes. The zombie player has this a bit easier though it is possible to be outmaneuvered by canny survivors.

Game length heavily depends on the number of players - a two player game is typically fairly short whereas five players can take a good few hours, a lot of this heavily dependent on luck and skill. Overall this is a cheap and cheerful game that will provide hours of gameplay, and comes with a large number of budget expansions, adding to the fun.

Ed Fortune

RATING 





## SULTANS OF REMA

**Author:** Gaetano Abbondanza  
**Publisher:** Tin Man Games  
**Platform:** iOS, Android  
**Release Date:** Out Now

*Sultans of Rema* is the 9th app in Tin Man Game's *Gamebook Adventures* series and is strong evidence that even the best can be improved upon. The Australian Android and iOS App developer started out converting old-school 'choose your fate' style *Fighting Fantasy* novels into a format that can be enjoyed on a smart-phone. However rather than simply trade on nostalgia they also produced their own unique brand of adventure gamebook, one that uses simple game mechanics and well put together prose to create engaging and exciting adventures that couldn't be more different from the iconic *Fighting Fantasy* series.

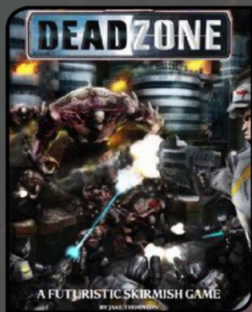
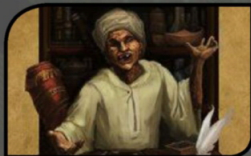
*Sultans of Rema* is a sequel of sorts to *Slaves of Rema*, but works fine as a stand-alone game. The plot sees you on a mission to help stabilise a region called the Emirates of Akbir. The Sultan is getting old and dark forces are gathering. You are a diplomat of sorts working for the greater good, or so it seems. The usual sort of elements are here; Noble desert nomads, ridiculous camel rides, mysterious assassins and of course a flying carpet. Appropriate music and artwork add to the effect resulting in an immersive desert adventure that can be enjoyed on the train to work. This is a well written tale that mixes in the intrigue of *Lawrence of Arabia* in with more traditional *Arabian Nights* oddness. It treats its source of inspiration with respect whilst at the same time is filled with plenty of

scimitar waving action. Combat and cleverness are an essential part of the game but it's the prose that really makes it stand out.

The usual Tin Man tricks are here; if you're a stinkler for rules you can play the game properly on normal mode or if you've never been one for letting things get in the way of fun then you can opt for free mode, which lets you fudge your health levels and turn to pages of the game you have not earned the right to read. In addition there is a lot of background material available in the special features, expanding on a world that we look forward to seeing Tin Man develop further. Overall if you like a bit of sand in your swords and sorcery adventures and enjoy novels that make you choose the path of the hero then you're in for a treat.

Ed Fortune

RATING



## DEADZONE

**Developer:** Jake Thornton  
**Publisher:** Mantic  
**Release Date:** Out Now

Games manufacturer Mantic are seen by many as the clear rival to model making giant Games Workshop. Though GW have many rivals who happen to be much larger, Mantic are based in the same city

and happen to employ a lot of ex-GW staff, so the rivalry seems a bit obvious. This is compounded by the similarity between the two companies' product lists. Mantic's last offering was the hyper-violent sci-fi sports games *Dreadball* which drew many casual comparisons with the hyper-violent fantasy sports game *Blood Bowl*, regarded as one GW's classic games. Their latest game, *Deadzone* is a scenery heavy skirmish game and therefore draws some comparison with classic (and utterly unsupported and out of print) gang war game, *Necromunda*.

Luckily for *Deadzone*, it only bares a passing resemblance to a game that is almost twenty years old. It's far more cinematic and has much smoother game mechanics. Set in Mantic's *Warpath* universe, the plot involves plague infected monsters invading an area and heavily armed and armoured Enforcers going into said area to purge the horrors. The rulebook is crammed with references to a broader world and though it could do with a little more flavour text, it does work as a nice development to the *Warpath* world.

Designer Thornton has crammed in many clever little mechanics such as line of site and exploding dice. Despite being essentially a war game, *Deadzone* has many board game elements. Everything takes place on a 2x2' rubber mat and movement is

dived into 'cubes'. The boxed set comes with lots of scenery so you find yourself moving up and over crates and gantry ways looking for a tactical advantage. With movement simplified to cubes it makes actions very straight forward. In addition to this, action is divided into discrete lumps, meaning that it's never too long before it's your turn so you won't get bored or distracted. Add to this various cards that allow special actions and bonuses, most of which enhance the action movie feel. It's an interesting blend of board and war game and the more complex elements (such as special rules for special models) are handled through the careful use of counters and cards. Thornton has tried to make this game as smooth and as simple to play as possible.

*Deadzone* started out on Kickstarter and people who subscribed to that campaign received lots of extras. The regular retail set has less goodies and this probably explains why the box itself feels a little roomy. There are plenty of models in the regular set and it represents value for money, but the box is huge. *Deadzone* is a worthy addition to anyone's gaming collection, but you might have a problem fitting it on the shelf.

Ed Fortune

RATING



# Retro BYTES

a look back at  
the World of  
Retro Gaming  
by Chris Jackson



And we're back! This month we're indulging our peurile, juvenile selves and taking a look at some of the nastiest, stupidest, and generally badass creations of the 16-bit era...

## Boogerman: A Pick and Flick Adventure

Kind-hearted environmentalist Professor Stinkbaum (really) has built a machine with which he plans send all the world's pollution to the most disgusting dimension in the unknown universe, known as "X Crement". Tubby eccentric millionaire Snotty Ragsdale decides to poke his nose in, and takes a job as a janitor at Stinkbaum's lab so he can figure out how the machine works. One evening after work, Snotty's doing his usual bit of Hoovering when he lets rip with an enormous... sneeze... and the machine suddenly activates itself.

A portal opens up and the machine's power source disappears through it, leading to Snotty making a quick visit to the bathroom where he turns into his alter-ego Boogerman before jumping through the portal to track down the big battery. Because every game needs a story, right?

What follows would usually be considered a fairly standard side-scrolling platformer, but *Boogerman* sets itself apart from most other games purely by being so horrible. Your main attack method is the "pick and flick", with Boogerman jamming a finger up his nose and flinging the globs of bright green snot at his enemies. Bottles of milk (at least we assume

it's milk - it's got an "M" on it) upgrade this attack to a faster "snotted" shot - you know when you see those vile folks in the street who blow their nose onto the floor? Well, that. Secondary to this is the belch attack, where Boogerman pauses for a second to build up a bit of wind before sending a toxic burp flying across the screen. And you can be sure that every one of Boogerman's actions has got an equally daft sound effect to go with it.

Add in toilets that act as *Mario*-style pipes leading to underground bonus rooms, warp noses that you jump up to take you to other parts of the level, and collectable toilet plungers giving extra lives, it's one of the daftest games of the 16-bit era. It's all very childish of course, with its colourful cartoony graphics and catchy music, but it's easy to see why a lot of mums probably didn't want their kids to play this one. Boogerman only made one other appearance (in *Clayfighter 63*<sup>2</sup> on the N64), and a 2013 Kickstarter campaign failed to attract enough investors to bring a HD remake to our screens. Give the original a try though, and decide for yourself whether that's a good thing or not!

## Power Pigs of The Dark Age

Oh Good lord, *Power Pigs Of The Dark Age*. Where do we start? Even the developers Radical Entertainment (makers of 2009's really rather good *Prototype*) don't want to know about this one any more, completely leaving it off their online resume as if it never even existed. Sometimes bad games can be worth revisiting though, and this is one of those occasions.

So there's these three medieval pigs, and they own a donut shop. As we'll find out shortly, these pigs bloody love donuts. The shop is really just a front for their crimefighting activities (we're in the dark ages, remember), because our heroes are in fact on a three-pig crusade against the evil Wizard of Wolff. What sort of animal do you suppose he might be? Got it in one!

Even though there are three Piggs on the title screen, we only ever get to meet one of them in the game itself. Perhaps the developers were hoping for a sequel (a sequel-quel? Don't worry, we're nearly done for this month), or maybe their lofty ambitions extended to hopes for a spinoff cartoon series or something. Not a chance. So what we really get is one third of the *Power Piggs* (the internet reckons his name's Bruno, not that you'd know from playing the game) running around levels that are, in all honesty, far too big, trying to



smack seven shades of you know what out of Wolff's warriors.

This immediately leads us to two massive problems. The levels are huge, both horizontally and vertically, with higher platforms requiring some pretty haphazard jumping and a great deal of luck to reach. Air vents blow you up into the sky, which doesn't make things any easier. Checkpoints are few and far between and are also a bugger to find, often being hidden away in secret areas. And while you're trying to get through the level, all manner of cross-dressing wolves (there's one that looks like a dog version of Dame Edna Everage auditioning for a part in the *Pink Panther* cartoon, and another wearing a harlequin outfit which my brain always immediately links with Joker-smoocher Harley Quinn) are either charging headfirst towards you, shooting fireballs at you, or sending arrows flying in your general direction, making life pretty miserable all round.

Your main weapon is a sword (because we're in medieval times), but slashing away at enemies isn't as straightforward as it should be. You have to get so close to the baddies to be able to hit them that they usually end up attacking first, and even if they don't there's still a high chance they'll get a couple of shots in while you're faffing around going for a second or third stab because they still aren't dead yet. Limited amounts of projectile weapons - donuts! - can be found by "butt slamming" wooden crates, but you only get half a dozen at a time so they're best saved until you really need them. There are also things that look like bubbles all around the levels which turn out to be donut holes - collecting 100 of these grants you an extra life, which you'll almost certainly be needing.

On a brighter note, while it's far from the best looking game in the world (the backdrops look fine but character animations are almost universally dreadful) there are a few flashes of inspiration here and there, with some of the enemies being particularly memorable



(although possibly for the wrong reasons). The music's really good as well - unsurprisingly it's got nothing to do with the characters or the setting, but good game music is good game music so we shouldn't really complain.

It's a peculiar game all round - you almost wonder if they didn't quite have time to completely finish making it before it was released. You can certainly see why nobody ever mentions it, but in a way it's a shame that something so daft has been completely forgotten about. Even though we've just spent a third of this month's column telling you how terrible it is, it's fun to see how wrong things could go back then. Even if you only play it once, it's worth getting hold of this one just to say you've experienced it...

## Two Crude Dudes

The plan was to save this for next month when there'd be a bit more room to go into

great detail about why this is one of the best games you've never heard of, but after suffering through *Power Piggies* we need something to end on a high with. And it's nice and simple, this one - evil terrorists, nuclear explosion, New York decimated, mercenaries to the rescue. Everything about this game is tremendous, from the neon coloured title screen to the music to the level backdrops to the hundreds of bad guys and bosses you'll encounter. *Two Crude Dudes* is AWESOME.

Taking control of one of the supersized massively-muscled Legion Of Doom shoulder-padded dudes (or one each if you've got a friend to do two-player with), all you need to do is walk from left to right and batter anything that gets in your way. As well as the standard punch attack, the dudes are strong enough to pick up junk from the environment to use as weapons - rubbish bins, parking meters, traffic lights, even cars and billboards can all be thrown at or smashed into the masses of enemies that come your way. Every character has got something memorable about them - there's the ones that look like Jake The Snake Roberts, the ones that look a bit like Predators, the nipple-biting dogs, and that's before we even get to the bosses. The big tall lanky one with scythes for hands, the one that turns into a werewolf, the one with the robotic arm... It's like the greatest 80s action film that never existed, and easily stands out as one of the best side-scrolling beat 'em ups ever made. Even if you're not a fan of brawlers, the setting, sound effects, graphics and music are all so flawless that you'd have to be dead inside to not find something enjoyable here. *Two Crude Dudes* receives the absolute highest of recommendations!

And with that, we're just about done for this month. Join us again next time for more nonsense memories from your childhood! ✦





## ROLL FOR DAMAGE



Ed Fortune guides you into the realm of tabletop gaming

# WHITE DWARF

Issue No.1 June/July 1977

60p (\$2.00)

2nd Reprint August 1979

The Science Fiction and Fantasy Games Magazine



The magazine's run from 1977 to 1987 covers a period of time when Games Workshop sold all sorts of games from a variety of manufacturers. This meant it was filled to the brim with tabletop roleplaying game scenarios, new game rules and even new games. When Games Workshop itself stopped selling games made by other people (broadly due to a shift in management), the magazine reflected this. Over the decades it gradually shifted from being a periodical stuffed with gaming tips, new rules, ideas and modelling projects into a glossy catalogue. After all, why tell people how to make wargaming scenery when you sell them the hills and buildings to put their toy soldiers on, and why introduce new rules in a magazine when you can sell those online. The final nail in the poor old Dwarf's coffin was making the annual subscriber only model available to non-subscribers. In the end, the only thing the old Dwarf had left was its dignity, and even then, only because they couldn't sell it. Strangely, a week after they announced the end of the magazine, the company's share price plummeted. The two are not directly connected, (the collapse of *White Dwarf* had been on the cards for years) but it does seem eerily poetic.

For some, the magazine had long since died in the late '80s, round about the time it stopped caring about the broader world of gaming. This left a hole in the market, which was swiftly filled in 1989 by *G.M.* magazine. It really tried to fill the gap, but oddly because it didn't have an obvious bias, the readership kept demanding that it be everything to everyone, which meant no one really loved it. The magazine itself is very much a product of its time - it had a slight Goth leaning, with an abundance of adventures and articles about vampire and werewolf games as well as interviews with Goth favourites such as Storm Constantine. It also included lots of adverts for Play By Mail games, mostly *It's A Crime*. (Think of it as a primitive version of that annoying *Mafia Wars* game you see on Facebook. Oddly enough, *PBM's* are still around today.) *G.M.* changed hands half way through its run, adding an 'International' to the end, but it was pretty much the same old thing. It also featured infrequent directories; where to get in touch with LARP kit makers, suppliers of wargaming models, that sort of thing. Precious information back in the days

The recent demise (and relaunching) of Games Workshop's gaming magazine, *White Dwarf*, caused quite the stir in the tabletop community recently. Rather than mourn the loss of the current magazine (which

has now been split into weekly 'catalogue' and monthly 'showcase' editions), the focus of most of the discussion seemed to be about *White Dwarf's* first 100 issues, considered by many to be the magazine's high point.



before the internet was popular. It finally got the chop toward the end of 1991, mostly due to a lack of subscribers.

Next up to take the challenge was *Role Player Independent*, which limped on for about a year before closing. It's main problem was the focus being very, very narrow, specialising in the sorts of games that only the hardcore geek enjoys, priding itself on an individual stance and approach. Sadly, with such a limited appeal no one bought it and it vanished in less than a year. The editor went on to produce *Valkyrie Magazine*, which had a much broader approach and was seen by many as the spiritual successor to the early eighties version of *White Dwarf*, especially as it featured many of the same writers and columnists. It survived till 2003, mostly by going quarterly, but it was the lack of a firm following that did it in.

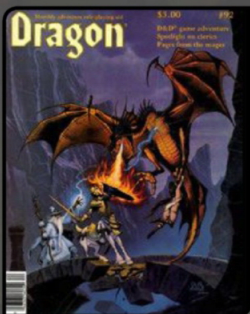
Another gaming magazine, *Warpspace*, came out roughly about the same time. Though more of a fanzine than anything else, its formatting and style was very close to that of early *White Dwarf*, and it exclusively dealt the *Warhammer Fantasy Role Play* game. It was never a regular periodical, and is practically unknown outside of select circles. It lasted all the way to 30 issues, finally throwing in the towel in 2009.

We should also quickly mention Future Publishing's contribution to the history of British gaming magazines. *Arcane* existed in the mid-'90s, and was a commercial success. Clever, witty, filled with the light sort of humour that suits the market, it did very well for what it was, and had its finger on the pulse of the gaming industry. Sadly it didn't make enough money for its owners and was folded.

Like *White Dwarf*, TSR's *Dragon* Magazine was also an in-house tabletop gaming magazine, focused primarily on *Dungeons and Dragons*. In its heyday, it was truly magnificent. Pages upon pages rammed

with reviews, articles and adventure ideas. Though it mostly existed to plug the incredibly popular versions of *Dungeons and Dragons* (both the classic game and the only-called-for-legal-reasons Advanced version), it also came with a free game. These were of excellent quality (in rules if not components), and the list includes the Tom Wham classic *Awful Green Things from Outer Space*. West End Games even took out a regular monthly advert in the magazine that, rather than containing the simple 'buy our stuff' message, instead contained content for its DC Heroes roleplaying game. Other companies followed suit - it was a wise thing to get a feature in *Dragon* and it was strongly reflective of the industry. *Dragon* was always a house magazine first and a platform for other games second. As the industry went through a dry spell in the nineties, the magazine hosted less and less none-D&D content. It is fondly remembered for the comic strips in the back; Larry Elmore's whimsical *SnarfQuest*, Chris Adam's satirical *Yamara*, John Kovalic's *Dork Tower* all had a home with this flagship magazine, and it even launched the career of steampunk cartoonist, Phil Foglio. We should of course mention *Thrud*, a strip that appeared in early editions of *White Dwarf* - less of a coherent story and more a series of cheap shots at *Conan the Barbarian*, the strip vanished only to appear years later as part of the UK indie comics scene.

The magazine did pretty well as the D&D game evolved. As TSR (the game's original manufacturers) changed hands, so did *Dragon*. It became sleeker and more modern, but kept fresh and engaging content throughout, never once did it cease to be a useful addition to a games master's reading list. Eventually though, time and business caught up with the old lizard. It's new owners, The Wizards of the Coast, passed responsibility for looking after its fire-breathing monster to a third party, a



then little known firm called Paizo Publishing. This was in 2002, when *Dungeons and Dragons* was enjoying a surge in popularity thanks to an excellent third edition. Paizo tied the magazine in more closely with its sister publication (the aptly named *Dungeon*) and it became a sort of part-work, each issue detailing a whole campaign setting.

In 2007, Wizards did not renew Paizo's license, and *Dragon* went online only, though the print edition got a truly excellent send-off; there was not a dry eye in the house. Partially this was due to Rich Burlew's *Order of The Stick* comic strip, which was an enormous shout-out to the history of the publication.

Without a read-easily-on-the-toilet version readily available, interest in *Dragon* gently waned, and though it's still around, it's long since lost any of the momentum or impact it once had. Paizo responded by producing its own magazine, *Kobold Quarterly*. The publication heavily features *Pathfinder*, a game that now outsells D&D. Nostalgia fans took a cue from *Kobold*'s success and produced *Gygax Magazine*. Named after the late inventor of the classic RPG, *Gygax* is a quarterly magazine that looks a lot like an eighties copy of *Dragon*. Its content is pretty much a more polished version of the magazine it's emulating, though it's a pain in the bottom to purchase in the UK, as it's an American publication on a very tight budget.

As you can see, *White Dwarf* did outlive its fellow gaming magazines, last dwarf standing and all that. Time will tell if its new incarnation as a weekly trade paper will work, but given the history of these things, things aren't looking bright for the bearded midget. Gaming magazines are mostly a loss-making labour of love, and without tender loving care, the stout one is doomed to simply be a footnote in gaming history.

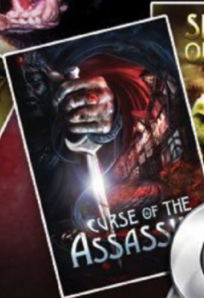
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# FIGHTING FANTASY

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## Heart of the Ocean

By Rich Pearson

My heart belongs to the ocean.

If it wasn't for the saltwater around me, you'd see my tears. Crying seems a waste as a result, but I can't stop. His body next to mine, still, tranquil, at peace; that's what I'm convincing myself his blank stare means. I take his hands and wrap myself into his arms. We sway in the water and I try to calm down, but to no avail. Tears flow faster and harder, making my face a contorted mask. I'm furious at myself, entirely to blame; I should never have brought him here. But I couldn't help it. I needed him here, I always need a man here.

The surging torrent of memories crashes into me, and I begin to drown in them.

As a child, I used to love swimming alongside the pier, hearing the dull and eerie whines of the fairground rides mingled with the sound of waves. I never went to the fairs though, my father always refused. He'd tell horror stories of knife-wielding thugs, bearded women and other terrors. Despite that, I'd still swim by them, the dull warble of organs and shadows of freakshows reflecting off the baywater, filling my mind with wild fantasies.

Eventually I decided I needed to see this world for myself. I was sixteen, adult enough, and certainly felt like one. A mind swimming with urges. I'd lust after men from afar, but terrified to act on any impulses. Father had made it clear that the men I liked, should never be pursued.

The first boy I kissed was a seventeen year old, Guy Marley, just shy of six foot and the palest eyes I'd ever seen. He'd been with enough girls not to be awkward around them, but he wasn't prepared for one like me. I'd meet him by the rockpools of a secluded cove, my body in the water, gently tilting my chest towards him. My long hair teasingly covering my breasts. I always met him like this, it's how I met him the first time.

I was spying on boys, tying shells into my locks, and singing. Guy heard my voice and crept into the cove. If I'd heard him coming, I would have swum away. Luckily I'd wrapped my naked body up against the rocks so he didn't see it. We didn't become lovers, just close. For weeks we'd talk for hours on end, days fading away like the retreating tide. Sometimes I'd sing for him, mesmerised he'd tell me how beautiful I was, and the bulge in his breeches suggested something similar.

Eventually, one of my melodies was too much for him; halfway through a chorus, he lunged into the water, wrapping his arms around my neck and waist. His tongue fitted around my mouth. I kissed back, hair floating off my breasts, my body exposed. His eyes opened slightly and he screamed. He thrashed away from my body, kicking my tailfin. His mouth filled with seawater and he started to choke.

I saved him, emptied his lungs amongst the tide pools. Hearing the commotion, an over curious crowd came, and all hell broke loose. Some wanted my tailfin for soup, others my vocal chords for medicines. Most just wanted me dead. I leapt back to the sea and swam home, salty tears mixing with the ocean. I never saw Guy again.

Father was wrong, the land-dwellers weren't the freakshow, I was. I hated my scaly lower half. I wanted to run, walk, dance, and make love like humans could. I knew only one person would help me, my old wet-nurse. She'd been sent into exile years ago for trying to swap one of my sisters with her own child at birth, to create scandal, and gain influence in the royal court. Since her exile, tales of her skills in unnatural arts spread.

I journeyed far beyond the coral wastelands to her realm. A sunken galleon, adorned with fragments of torn sails, drifting like the ghosts of drowned sailors. The prow cracked from years of decay, or the rumoured kraken attack that brought the vessel down.

I knocked tentatively on the door to the captain's quarter, it creaked too, and I was beckoned in.

She wasn't the hag I imagined, no tentacles, warts, nor any other oddities. The only difference between her and other merfolk was that her limited supplies to the riches of civilisation had left her skin and scales dull and flaking.

She seemed willing to help me, although I was a royal. I realise now that I should have been more suspicious. But I was young, foolish, and desperate for the feel of a man. I would get my legs, and the ability to move between land and sea as I pleased. But, I would lose my voice for three days. If I received the love of a man in this time, it would return; fail, I would turn to seafoam. I agreed, but the wet-nurse continued.

"There's more to it than that, sweetheart! You may get the love of a man, but he won't get yours. Your heart shall belong only to the ocean. That is, unless you can find a man who can sink to the depths with you and retrieve it."

I agreed again, as long as I had his affections, I'd be fine. After all, that's all I wanted. At the time, at least.

The spell the wet-nurse performed was excruciating. She gave me lionfish tea, a strong and highly illegal sedative to ease the pain. It didn't. She grabbed a hardened sponge and scoured my scales off. I howled as she did, the saltwater against the wound was too much to bear. With each scream she caught my voice in a clam and sealed it. Seaweed was wrapped around my exposed fin next, I winced as the bind became tighter and tighter. Then, the worst part came. She grabbed a stick of coral and drove it through my tail. Blood diffused like smoke into the water. I writhed in agony. The wet-nurse slapped me and told me to be still. Finally, using jellyfish stings, she cauterised the wound. I began to black out, as the wet-nurse produced more coral, a needle and thread. I knew the butchery was far from over.

I awoke, no pain, my vision and mind as hazy as each other. The sea came back into focus and then I saw it. My heart, lodged in a stack of coral. I went to scream, but no sound. I looked down. A tailfin. I'd been cheated. Silently I cursed the wet-nurse, but heard her behind me.

"You have legs, my sweet. But only on land. They'd be useless at this depth. And no scars either. Aren't I good to you? Now go. Find your man. Get your heart back."

With that, I swam up to my new life.

As I came onto land, I launched myself out of the water and felt my tailfin split into ribbons, then legs. The transition was

a quick, sharp pain, but felt natural. I landed on the sand running. Granted I had no clothes, but there were plenty of towels to steal. Wrapping one around my waist, I set off looking for a man.

Unsurprisingly, a slender sixteen year old girl with her breasts on show gets plenty of attention; unfortunately, it's not the good kind. As I was close to the promenade, I saw a man walking towards me from a beach hut, wearing just loose pants. His face was old and unkempt, covered with hair and sporting a colossal waist. He advanced towards me. I knew where this was going. I panicked and stumbled. Before I could get back up to my feet, he slung me over his shoulder. I tried to cry for help, but couldn't. Tears fell silently down my face as the door of the beach hut shut.

He threw me to the floor, and drove his bulk on top of me. He wrestled with his pants, then grinned. I won't explain what happened next. However, I learnt that the love of a man I needed didn't have to be the sentimental kind. After his final grunts, I felt my throat burn. I howled. He kept slapping my face to make me stop, but nothing would silence me near this beast.

Eventually, the screams worked. The door sprang open, a second man appeared in the doorway. He strode over and kicked my abductor in the face, blood splattered over me and teeth clattered along the floorboards. He didn't get back up. I was helped to my feet, and I began to sob. My rescuer told me to stop crying, wrapped my body up in towels and carried me to an inn.

Although I had my voice back, I didn't speak out of fear. All he said was that I'd be safe. I looked up at his face. He had short hair, golden with hints of grey. Deep blue eyes, kind but stern. Although he had a warm smile, it was tainted by stubble, and a scar which ran down over the right hand side of his lips. He was also covered with muscles and tattoos. His nose looked like it had been broken repeatedly. He wasn't handsome, but he was attractive.

He settled me in the nearest inn, then left. I took the time to remove the splinters the attack had left in my skin.

My rescuer returned with a bottle, and told me its contents would help prevent pregnancy. Furious liquid fire burnt my innards and purged any sins.

That night we talked for hours. His name was Dominic O'Hara. He told me stories of his sea adventures and his tattoos, namely a mermaid on his chest. He'd heard the myth of sea sirens, and in hopes of seeing one, had become a sailor. The mermaid was crudely drawn and looked like a man.

I promised him, I'd show him what a real mermaid looked like.

Upstairs, I ran a bath. As I got in, my legs twisted together to a fin amongst the bubbles. I began to sing. A Merish love song. Dominic came in, it was a song no man could resist. He paused in the doorway and stared at me. Calmly, he smiled, told me I was the most beautiful creature, and lifted me out of the bath. My legs unravelled and wrapped around him as he did so. There was hesitation in his eyes, but I told him I wanted him. He carried me to the bedroom.

Dominic fell in love with me over the next two years. But I couldn't return the affection. I was attracted, but heartlessness prevented me from loving. In frustration, I

explained my curse one night. When I finished, Dominic was in tears. He vowed he'd help me rescue my heart.

The next day we dived into the ocean, he held on tightly as I sang an old nursery rhyme to protect loved ones. I knew this journey was perilous. I failed to realise though that my song drowned out the muffled outbursts of Dominic slowly drowning. His body contorted then began to break under the crushing depths. The water filled with blood, and all tightness left his body. His grip loosened completely, and I saw what I'd done. I let go, and watched his shattered corpse drift away.

I couldn't weep for him, I never loved him. My lust-driven recklessness was reason enough to cry.

Foolishly for twenty years, I've tried to save my heart. Singing by ships, grabbing enraptured men who leap overboard to pull them down to my heart, in hopes they survive. They never do.

I cannot continue with this torturous routine anymore.

I push my heart into the sharp coral. The membrane resists, strains, then slowly splits. Blood diffuses into the ocean, and I sink into a crimson slumber.

My heart belongs to the ocean, and now my body and soul will too.



Art by Rylan Cavell



Paul Mount's



*This month TV Zone winds its way down to Baker Street to find out what game's afoot with Sherlock, explores 'doing a True Blood' in relation to American Horror Story and shares its first impressions of The Tomorrow People and Helix...*

As someone once said, be careful what you wish for. I know I will in future. Way back in Starburst 375 I voiced the opinion that maybe BBC's hugely-successful *Sherlock* could lighten up a bit. The show had just completed its second three-episode run and whilst I was generally comfortable with the series' slick, flashy style I had some concerns about the waspish, off-hand, occasionally remote and deadpan nature of Holmes himself, otherwise brilliantly portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch. "It'd be nice to see him smile a bit more" I observed in all innocence. Me and my big mouth...

When it first appeared in 2010 *Sherlock*, the creation of Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, was a sizzling and revelatory piece of British TV - a stonkingly-good reinvention of one of the most enduring and beloved characters in British fiction. It was classy, beautifully-made, well-scripted and it made an instant megastar of Cumberbatch and finally freed Martin Freeman from the 9 to 5 shackles of *The Office*. This was a clever 21<sup>st</sup> century Holmes, a larger-than-life contemporary detective deftly retaining all the quirks and idiosyncrasies of Conan Doyle's original and mapping them over into an inane modern world of texts, emails and incessant blogging. The first two series of *Sherlock* were pretty much as good as British TV series could be expected to get on the money usually available to make it. The cliffhanger of the season two finale - *Sherlock* apparently plunging to his death from the roof of St Bart's Hospital in London - had the nation scratching its collective head for two long years wondering quite how the Great

Detective could have survived the fall.

But when *Sherlock* finally returned last month, it appeared that something slightly troubling had happened. The show had succumbed to its own myth; it had become bloated, self-indulgent, fatuous and vacuous, a string of comedy sketches hung around the skeleton of a plot and with *Sherlock* himself losing almost all of the mysterious 'otherness' which had made the first two series compelling.

Halfway through the first episode, 'The Empty Hearse', as I was waiting for the actual story to arrive, I realised with a sick gut feeling, that I was watching *Sherlock* turn into *Doctor Who*. The series was suddenly obsessed with its own myth as Watson tried to get on with his life two years after *Sherlock*'s apparent death and various Holmes' obsessives theorised about how he hadn't actually died at all. When *Sherlock* finally resurfaced it appeared that Benedict Cumberbatch had morphed into Matt Smith because I defy anyone to tell me how Cumberbatch's performance in the scenes - and God, there we so many of them - where *Sherlock* reveals that he's still alive to his old friend Watson - differs from the hyperactive turns of Matt Smith as the Doctor. Although written by Gatiss, 'The Empty Hearse' was textbook Moffat; non-stop banter, no proper story, massive gaps in logic, more banter and finally a little bit of story flung in at the end for the sake of it. With added banter.

I've been conscious that, of late, this column has been in danger of becoming a Steven Moffat dashboard. I've made no bones of the fact that I've little stomach for his vision of *Doctor Who* as a lovely fairytale full of lovely people where no-one ever dies (or at least not for long) and everything's lovely in a lovely twinkly Universe. (To Hell with that, by the way; *Doctor Who*, as Russell T Davies so astutely observed, is and should be "steeped in death" - give me monsters, madmen, screaming terror and death.) But I've been prepared to allow Moffat a little more latitude with his interpretation of *Sherlock Holmes* because the whole point of the series is that it *isn't* 'classic' Conan Doyle and liberties are not only there to be taken they *need* to be taken. A modern version of *Sherlock Holmes* has to be audacious, cheeky and a little bit knowing;





but the third season seems to have tipped the scales a little too much towards 'look how clever we are' at the expense of proper coherent and interesting drama.

So I'd been expecting to write-off the entire third series of *Sherlock* with one great swoosh of my metaphorical red marker pen; *must try harder, see me*. The second episode 'The Sign of Three', little more than an extended stag night/wedding day comedy skit, was worse than the first, a time-wasting piece of fluff so lacking in worthwhile content it verged on the insulting. But then the series managed to redeem itself and cling onto its credibility in its final episode. And strike me down with a barrowful of fezzes if 'His Last Bow' wasn't written by Steven Moffat himself.

'His Last Vow' was right up there with the best of *Sherlock* and it even managed to make a bit more sense of the episodes which had preceded it. With only three feature-length episodes per series, *Sherlock* has a lot to cram in and it's a brave (or possibly even mad) series which attempts to create and develop running 'arcs' to play across three installments. Perhaps this is where *Sherlock* suffers and becomes a little too breakneck to allow its audience to properly appreciate its subtleties, its nuances and just how damned clever it can be when it keeps its sense of zany under control.

The two 'themes' of this third series have been the 'humanising' of Sherlock and his chum John Watson meeting the woman of his dreams (Mary Morstan, boisterously played by Freeman's real-life partner Amanda Abbington). The 'humanising' of Holmes leads to much ill-advised and often tiresome comedy - Sherlock gets drunk! Sherlock flirts! Sherlock is wacky! - but Mary Morstan gets the better deal. In just three episodes we learn that she and Watson are *an item*, we see them get married and then we learn her terrible secret. It's a *great* terrible secret, though, and it's a

real tribute to Moffat that its revelation feels *right*, even after just a couple of episodes; other series blessed with greater episode counts could and would have stretched out the mystery across a year or two. *Sherlock* doesn't have that luxury and *that* pay-off in 'His Last Vow' and its repercussions have an emotional heft the previous two throwaway, playful episodes could never have hinted at.

The villain of the piece, Charles Augustus Magnussen, played with icy precision by Lars Mikkelsen, is in many ways a classic daft Moffat bad guy; the self-proclaimed 'Napoleon of blackmail', he claims to know the personal and professional weaknesses of everyone and anyone of importance in the Western world, secrets hidden deep in a vault in his country fortress. Sherlock and Watson confront Magnussen in his lair only to discover that his secrets are kept in one very inaccessible place and that there's only one way to keep those secrets... well, *secret*. Sherlock's casual dispatching of his latest and most implacable enemy (and I don't expect to see any other TV baddies weeing in the hero's fireplace this year or any other) is a sudden, brutal and very welcome reminder that despite all the joshing, the quips and the pratfalls of the previous two episodes, *Sherlock* Holmes still isn't quite as human as he might have appeared or desired to be. And another potential cliffhanger ending - Sherlock flying off into exile to avoid the consequences of his disposal of Milverton - is beautifully subverted by the sudden and unexpected return of Sherlock's most infamous adversary and a swift turnaround for the aircraft taking Holmes off to an uncertain future.

In the end it was Steven Moffat, of all

people, who saved the third season of *Sherlock*. But then maybe the show didn't really need saving; the frivolity of the first two episodes was very probably the long game from the outset, lulling the audience into a false sense of insecurity and fearing that our hero had gone soft, gone silly, gone Moffat. But despite his baffling mishandling of *Doctor Who* it seems that Moffat (along with Gatiss) has a surer hand on *Sherlock's* tiller and is steering this particular vessel on a steadier course than he's ever managed with the TARDIS. I can now forgive the first two dodgy episodes of season three because 'His Last Vow' was so subtly, slyly magnificent but I'm hoping that season four - whenever it arrives - will see the show reign back the smugness, cut back on the in-jokes and steer Mr Cumberbatch away from the choppy waters of Matt Smith he's been drifting into this year.

Oh, and how exactly *did* Sherlock survive that fall??

#### AMERICAN HORROR STORY: COVEN

In the end it was Kathy Bates' disembodied head wot did it. They used to call it 'jumping the shark'; that moment when a hitherto blameless TV show goes a bit soft in the head and does something mad which turns it into a redundant laughing stock instead of the TV toast of the town it might once have been. These days I prefer to call it 'doing a *True Blood*', a defining moment when an impressive show goes too far and throws its credibility out of the window forever. For *me True Blood* did it in season three when feisty heroine Sookie (Sookie!) was revealed to be one of the fairy folk, much given to frolicking in soft-focus





forests and mooching about in meadows. Phhhhhh, that was me pretty much done with the Bon Temps massacre.

So it is that *American Horror Story*, in a *Coven* incarnation for its third season, went all *True Blood* on its scary ass when it decided it'd be a good idea to have the head of Kathy Bates resurrected 19<sup>th</sup> century racist socialite killer Delphine LaLaurie removed from its body and forced to watch *Roots* on DVD until she sees the error of her ways. (She kept her eyes shut, incidentally, to blot out the offending mini-series.) Sorry, that's a line crossed waaaaay too far into silliness for me to cope with. But then I'd already grown tired of *AHS*'s willfully perverse stories, unsympathetic characters and 'look, this'll sicken you' shock 'n' awe gore and violence way before Ms Bates got a dose of her own miseries. After an intriguing - if frustrating - first season, *AHS* just became dull, ugly and occasionally downright perverted in its second series *Asylum* and I bailed out long before the final whistle. But *AHS*'s unique format - recurring cast, new story every season - drew me back for this third run and the first few episodes at least piqued my interest.

*Coven* is largely based in New Orleans, in and around a special school set up to protect the descendants of the witches of Salem who have almost become extinct. The 'Supreme' witch Fiona (Jessica Lange) returns to bring order to the curious coven (which includes, as the audience's 'gateway' to the series, newcomer Zoe Benson). But Fiona, ageing and terminally-ill, is desperate to regain her youth and will stop at nothing to attain a state of perpetual beauty. But there's also a long-standing rivalry at work between the witches, a voodoo cult and a bluntly-racist 19<sup>th</sup> century slave-owner buried alive, resurrected and forced into servitude for the fledgling coven.

Now I'm all for suspending disbelief - this column is pretty much about nothing else - but sometimes even my imagination isn't up to the job. And neither is my patience. After a promising start, *Coven* descended into a rambling, largely incoherent collection of horror tropes and clichés hung around another bunch of nasty, unsympathetic characters who insist on doing deeply unpleasant things to one another. *Coven* throws just about everything into its meandering mix: witches, voodoo, zombies, ghosts, serial killers. There might even be a robot in there for all I know. In one episode Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks turns up for no apparent reason and sings a couple of nice songs from her back catalogue.

Maybe I took my eye off the ball somewhere around episode three but certainly by episode six I'd lost track of whatever passed for *Coven*'s narrative and just sat occasionally gawping at the show's audacious idiocy and inarguable campness. Oddly enough, where the original series riffed cleverly on the 'haunted house' theme and *Asylum* was just mean minded, *Coven*'s not even especially scary. People are flung about by witchpower, there's some random bloodletting and Kathy Bates' head watches TV - but it all comes across as just too arch and too much to disturb or offend or even take particularly seriously. The show's classy cast - Jessica Lange, Taissa Farmiga (sister of *Bates Motel*'s brilliant Vera), Angela Bassett, *Six Feet Under*'s Frances Conroy - all deserve better material than this; *American Horror Story* seems determined to get darker and dirtier every season but this year, a victim of its own previous success, it's just become unsubtle, obvious and remarkably tame. But in the plus column, that's one Hell of a title sequence this year, offering up floating witches, eerie rituals in misty forests and what in the name of Satan's slippers is that winged, twiggy thing supposed to be? If *Coven* had given us a bit more stuff like this and a bit less Stevie Nicks then maybe the series itself might not have been such a crushing, uninvolved and uninspiring bore.

But then that's the thing with *American Horror Story*: if this one's not to your taste, there'll be another entirely different one along next year...

#### SOME FIRST IMPRESSIONS...

I love a good 'killer virus' thriller but, a handful of episodes in, I'm not quite sure what the point of *Helix* is, as it tries to service a genre already well-fed by the likes of *Contagion*, *Outbreak* ("Have you seen this monkey?") and TV shows like *Survivors* and even *The Walking Dead*. The involvement of Ronald D Moore promised a show much more innovative and edgy than *Helix*, the credits of which boast that it's a 'Syfy Original Series' when what's on offer isn't far removed from the sort of 'Syfy Original Movie' churned out by tat-peddlers such as *The Asylum* and *Nu Image*. In a nutshell, *Helix* tells of a remote



Helix

Antarctic research facility where a lethal virus has gone rogue and a bunch of utterly faceless scientists are drafted in to try and contain it. I'd been hoping for something contemporary and edgy, a sort of modern-day *Doomwatch* but all we've got so far is *Zombies* on Ice with a bit of *The Thing* thrown in for good measure and, oddly, shades of *Doctor Who*'s 2009 episode 'Waters of Mars'. Hopefully my attitude towards *Helix* will thaw (see what I did there?) in the coming weeks after I've seen a flurry of new episodes but at the moment the outlook for the show looks distinctly chilly...

*The Tomorrow People*, airing on E4 in the UK, is off to an agreeable, if derivative start. This is ITV's 1970s children's SF adventure reinvented as a glossy, chiselled action show with most of the SF sucked right out - no monsters, aliens, spaceships or ray guns here, kids. Created for and screened on The CW Network in the US (home of *Arrow*, *Supernatural*, *The Vampire Diaries* - you'll be picking up on the theme here) this is all about smart, sexy, super-powered teens coming to terms with growing up, relationships and mild peril with a bit of young male toplessness thrown in for good measure. It's entirely harmless and watchable but it lacks the mad spirit of invention of the original series and clearly has no intention of aiming at anything higher than snagging an audience of teenagers interested in watching non-threatening boys failing in and out of love with moody dark-haired young girls. Personally I can't help yearning for the occasional sock-puppet alien ambassador or papier-mâché spaceship... or maybe I'm just showing my age... +

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# it's only a movie

a column by Jordan Royce

Life is easy being a Mundane. You just go about your daily life watching and listening to a spoonfed playlist of audio visual entertainment. You can also survive a Saturday night at home in front of the television, without wanting to tool up with assault weaponry and forcefully share your displeasure in a public place. Everything is doable. Everything is possible. Holidays are easy to sort out, even when you have chosen one of those crazy places where the sun isn't shining. Even a bucket list is easily taken care of over a few weeks, given sufficient funds, and access to a bridge high enough to bungee jump from. It becomes slightly more difficult when you play in the sci-fi, horror, fantasy sandbox. When there is a bit of geek in your life, money and a few weeks off just don't cut it! Our bucket lists are driven by stupidity rather than adrenaline. I definitely had two ticks lined up to add to my personal bucket list, and both were able to be achieved by taking a quick trip to Berlin. After sorting out babysitters for Zombaby and Vambaby, I was off for a little taste of extreme tourism...

Now I quite enjoyed **The Chernobyl Diaries**, but it was the first half I was much more taken by. The idea of mooching about in the long abandoned, irradiated husk of Chernobyl was just so exciting to me. From an early age I have had an almost primal fascination with ruins and lonely places. Places that exude a faded grandeur. So sod the mutant monster squad, I just wanted to see inside all the buildings, and see the abandoned amusement park. The abandoned fairground/amusement park is a popular horror movie trope, and the stuff of many adolescent nightmares. It's also a movie buff's wet dream to actually experience one in real life. The problem with actually getting to see one in reality is not easily achieved in a modern paradigm as any vast empty space, post an economic closure, soon morphs into a housing estate. **Spree Park** in Berlin seemed like the real deal, and had skillfully avoided the evil forces of redevelopment due to a bizarre set of circumstances, that meant that bucket list tick number one was actually going to happen.



12 years on and the Spree Park wheel keeps on turning...

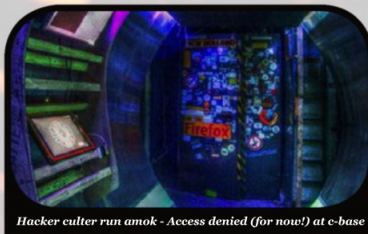
So how had **Spree Park** managed to stay shut down but largely intact as the day it, VERY ABRUPTLY, closed? Well back in 2002 its owner Norbert Witte had a brainstorm and decided to open a sister theme park in Peru. He promptly arranged for 6 rides to be transported there from **Spree Park**, one of which was an Aladdin's flying carpet ride. What the cheeky little Norbert had missed off the paperwork for this relocation was the 180 kilos of cocaine that he had hidden in the magic carpets, leading to *A Whole New World* of problems for him, and a SERIOUS amount of bird. In an almost sitcom-like attempt to keep it in the family, his son was also to get 20 years for a similar offence within a matter of months. Hence the park remains in a weird limbo.

Unlike the tourist guy in **Chernobyl Diaries** we had to meet the guide on site at a GPS location for a place called Café Mythos. This involved a walk through the woods (seriously, this theme park was off the beaten track), a walk that was weird in daylight, but would be terrifying at night. Then as you begin to approach the location you are met with a moaning wail straight out of a Jeff Wayne concept album. A sound which just got worse the closer you got to the park. Café Mythos actually turned out to be an abandoned refreshment hut temporarily transformed into a German hot dog stand (yeah, I know what they're called but I really can't be bothered with the special symbols feature in Word). **Spree Park** was

everything you could hope for. Disused rides rusting away (including a fairly modern roller coaster, and a dried up log flume), occasional bursts of graffiti, abandoned amusement arcade with rotting video game cabinets, abandoned resin dinosaurs, and a very strange atmosphere. The waiting throughout the park turned out to be the by-product of a huge Ferris wheel that was continuing to turn 12 years after the park closed; a noise generated by the wind constantly winning a strange tug of war with the failing brake mechanism. It's a noise literally like nothing else on Earth - mesmerising and penetrating in equal measures. Even now it's hard to get out of my head. You could wander around the place all day, it's just so bloody awesome. Not sure if anyone would have the bottle to stay there overnight though.

My second mission was far less successful. Starburst Shauna discovered a venue known as **c-base** when she honoured Berlin with her presence last year. It's an underground base devoted to furthering computer science and tech stuff in general. It's run by a secretive but friendly bunch of geeks by all accounts, who have created the *mother of all hackspaces*. The myth behind this fascinating place is that it is the remnants of a space station that crashed in Berlin after falling through a time warp. With an on-board computer system called C-beam, aliens in the toilet, a talking hand scanner at the entrance, and (apparently) looking like a set from **2001: A Space Odyssey**. I just had to find this place.





The search began quite well. I followed Shauna's instructions and got to the area by crossing a bridge over a river. Then 2 hours of searching lead us to a building with a **c-base** sign on it, but no entrance. I then wandered around looking for a geek. After scanning an endless amount of German hipsters, finally I spotted a guy with an odd hat, and a backpack. I followed him from a distance. He got to the building with the **c-base** sign then disappeared into thin air (I feel it important to point out that I have never actually taken any class A drugs). Thankfully for my sanity I spotted an alcove he had dived into, and walked down. There it was. An airlock door from a low rent sci-fi movie. It was a safe bet this was the place. There was the sound of '90s techno emanating from within. Then came the let-down. Sadly there was a private meeting, and no visitors (they refer to them as *aliens*), would be permitted that night. Access denied! I had to catch a flight home the next day, and so the **c-base** remains a place that I really need to see. This experience has only made me more curious. Still, I was going home with one geeky bucket list tick.

Back home it was time to catch up with the new movie from Spike Jonze, **her**. Back in 1999 I literally dragged everyone I knew to see **Being John Malkovich**, a film that turned existentialism into a

new operating system (thankfully not Windows 8, an OS which could easily fill the lead role in a futuristic remake of **Single White Female**). Now much is being made of Scarlett Johansson and her permanent post-coital cigarette delivery. She does make the OS Samantha into a very endearing, sexy, and witty persona. But it is Phoenix (thankfully having got the cinematic faux breakdown out of his system), and Amy Adams as his best friend that really steal the show here. Phoenix in particular delivers an astonishing range of emotions in this flick, proving that, whilst he might sometimes behave like a bit of a dick, he really is that good an actor.

Although really appreciating Jonze's work, I was very sceptical about this film, as it was plagued with problems. Samantha Morton was replaced at the last minute by Johansson, and there was the monumental 14 month edit down from 150 to only 90 minutes, aided by Steven Soderbergh. It is with relief that I can report that this does seem to have been a process of perfecting rather than a salvage job. In particular the style of Soderbergh really suits this movie, which does have a similar tone to **Sex, Lies and Videotape**, albeit with a less salacious subject matter. The tone of **her** is pitch perfect, very carefully capturing the aesthetic of a busy world, yet populated by people living in isolation. Later on in the movie Theodore and Samantha begin a process of drifting apart, and it is the portrayal of this process that is so beautifully played out, elevating **her** into something rare. In fact it is so well played out that it actually helps to shed light (in an allegorical sense) on the real world experience of breaking up. The allegory is so

powerful it makes you sit and ruminate over your own past relationships, and gives you something genuine to think about.

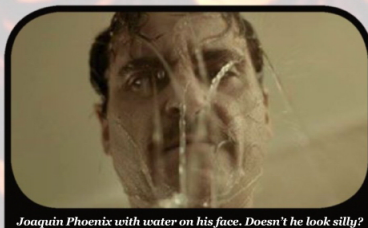
The fact that Spike Jonze has made an insightful movie is of no surprise to anyone who is familiar with his work. As is the fact that it is also a contender for soundtrack of the year - a superb collaboration with Arcade Fire. What is a genuine surprise is its commercial accessibility. In essence **her** is a straightforward updating of the novel **Pygmalion** that takes you on a very enjoyable, and thought provoking journey. It's also Spike Jonze's best movie since **Being John Malkovich**, and I can see this making my top ten list of movies this year.

I also want to give a shout out for a movie currently doing the rounds on DVD. **Odd Thomas**, is based upon the highly regarded series of novels by Dean Koontz. Unlike the movie **Sixth Sense** we do know that our main character can see dead people straight from the word go. I liked the premise of Odd fighting a secret war against creatures known as Borchads, whilst using his clairvoyant abilities to fight the corner of the recently murdered. Sadly the fact that Stephen Sommers was directing and Anton Yelchin was starring did not sell this to me one little bit. Stephen Sommers only produces two things that I am aware of, faeces and bad movies, whilst Yelchin was saved in **Star Trek** only by replacing Walter Koenig, an actor with the thespic range of a rotting cabbage.

Turns out I was wrong. Mr Sommers has made a good movie, and Mr Yelchin was really quite watchable - I actually started to like him. It must be the noise from that Ferris wheel - I'm damaged goods! Apparently this is a fairly faithful adaptation, except for the role of Elvis Presley's ghost, which is happily relegated to a slightly more two dimensional role (I bloody hate Elvis!). It's simple genre entertainment, but sad and serious exactly when it needs to be. **Odd Thomas** is probably not going to set the genre on fire, but if you like **Buffy the Vampire Slayer**, and like your horror occasionally delivered with fun, then I would definitely give this a watch.

All in all not a bad start to the year. Now all I need to do is get this damn noise out of my head...

Jordan Royce can be contacted at [Jordan.royce@starburstmagazine.com](mailto:Jordan.royce@starburstmagazine.com) and co-hosts the Starburst Radio Show with Assistant Editor Kris Heys, every Wednesday 9pm until 11pm GMT on Fab Radio International - [www.fabradiointernational.com](http://www.fabradiointernational.com) also available from iTunes as a Podcast



Joaquin Phoenix with water on his face. Doesn't he look silly?

TOBY STEPHENS

CAITY LOTZ

DENIS LAWSON

A FILM BY CARADOG W. JAMES

# THE MACHINE



"YOU'RE GOING TO WANT TO SEE IT"

THE VERGE

"MASSIVELY COOL"

FANGORIA

"CAITY LOTZ IS PHENOMENAL"

MARK YOUNG, SOUND ON SIGHT

IN CINEMAS AND ON DEMAND 21ST MARCH

ON DVD & BLU-RAY 31ST MARCH

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